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# **In The Sea of Memory: Embodiment and Agency in the Black Diaspora**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Social Studies of the University  
of Warwick for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## SUMMARY OF THESIS

This thesis is a sustained meditation on the relationship between embodiment, memory and cultural creativity in the black diaspora. It seeks to generate a theoretical vocabulary outside the stale polarisation between essentialism and anti-essentialism. Using the phenomenology of lived experience, I contend that black diasporic memory and identity are actively constructed within each present. I argue that bodily expression is part of a broader set of cultural strategies of self-definition, self-maintenance and self-preservation. In the case of the black diaspora, the past is evoked, invoked and provoked into existence once again through each expression of embodiment. A key concern in the thesis is therefore to highlight the active capacity of the body to recreate its world and in the process empower, renew and re-orient itself in the face of adversity and oppression. Rather than succumb to an account of black diasporicity as either a history of pain or the background of cultural hybridity, I argue that the pleasures and pains of black diasporicity are different aspects of the same ongoing phenomenon. Through the example of Jamaican dancehall culture, I show how the adorned, transgressive dancing body of dancehall women creates a dynamic of eroticised autonomy in an otherwise hostile environment. In sum, my thesis provides an analysis of the dynamics of diasporic identity and the antiphonies of continuity and discontinuity.



## Introduction

In his essay, 'Princes and Powers' (1951) James Baldwin asks the following question: 'For what beyond the fact that all black men [and women] at one time or another left Africa or have remained there, what do they really have in common?' His response:

What they held in common was their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the white world. What they held in common was the necessity to make the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people. What, in sum, black [people] held in common was their ache to come into the world as men. And this ache united people who might otherwise have been divided as to what man should be. (1951: 49-50)

The question Baldwin asks about the nature of black identity and existence, and to some extent the answer he provides, sets the framework for this thesis. His question, 'what do black people have in common?' is first of all answered in negative terms: black people share a common history of pain imposed by white supremacist domination. If this were all black people had in common, black identity would surely become a myth. It is a tautology to say that if shared pain is the only form of sharing, then there is no sharing beyond this. Any suggestion of an essence to being black, whether it is laid out in historical, biological, cultural or any other terms, would be deconstructed once the realisation was made that black identity was always only ever provisional. Black identity would therefore be like any other form of enforced grouping unnecessary outside of the

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confines of oppression. In this case, it would only be the ongoing and ever mutating form of white supremacy that guarantees black identity.

If we look at Baldwin's response closely, we will see that his response concerning black commonality and identity is however more nuanced than this. Baldwin emphatically links the framework of a history of oppression with the project for emancipation - 'what they held in common was the necessity to make the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people'. It is this connection between oppression and the exigency to act, to refuse domination that is at the core of this thesis. Like Baldwin, I will seek to refuse the equating of a history of suffering with powerlessness, and the framework of white supremacy with the ascription of a lack of agency. In sum, I shall argue that despite the context of existential pain and suffering, black people continue to strive to 'make the world in their own image'. It is this striving, and the paradigms and practices of creative expression that develop in its wake, that finally unites black people across all their differences. In this sense, Baldwin's response to the question of black identity points towards some of the key arguments of this thesis: the relationship between black history and oppression, agency and creativity amidst the pains of difference. To progress further, it is necessary that first of all we begin to clarify how black identity has been configured in theory, and furthermore the relation between this theorisation and *power*. It is only then that the work of exploring black historical agency can begin to unfold.



## **Identity As Power**

Theories on the formation of black identity have generally been linked with domination, exclusion and repression. From the exclusion of black people from citizenship because they were constituted as commodities, being relegated to the status of sub-person (Mills 1998), and being constituted as the repressed of Other of the European Man (Spillers 1987) black existence has revolved around exploitation, social inequalities, disciplinary control, and violence. This is not to say that these theorists have not offered powerful accounts of black agency and resistance. It is more the case that accounts of agency and resistance takes exclusion and domination as a starting point. While I would clearly not want to deny the existence of structures of inequality that maligns black life, I am unhappy with an account of agency that makes domination and oppression determinative. This is because such a starting point frames in advance the way in which we talk about agency, resistance and our capacity to change our situation. Moreover, the danger of such a starting point creates a situation whereby the mere existence or everyday action of a subordinate group is automatically seen as subversive, in some way radical and inherently transformative of the status quo. This is precisely the claim made by Corrie Claiborne in her essay 'Leaving Abjection: Where "Black" Meets Theory'. Claiborne argues that by the virtue of being born black and female, African American women 'are always already unstable and disruptive to the dominant structure' (1996: 34). In my view, there is nothing inherent about being black and female that is disruptive to the dominant structure. As I shall argue throughout this thesis, disruption to and transformation of hegemonic power structures is not automatically given. I suggest that transformation of

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the given is a metaphysical possibility in a *virtual sense* that is available to all cultures. However, in order to fulfil this metaphysical promise there needs to be a moment of action, or a practice or an event or a tradition. I am suggesting that as agents embedded within a field of power relations we acquire various capacities which predispose us to respond and act in a variety of ways to structures of power towards self-autonomy and collective solidarity. Subversion, thus, becomes possible when there is an active response to this metaphysical promise.

This brings us back to Baldwin. Given the history of domination and the continued injustice in the contemporary, what would it mean to theorise the agency of black identity using a non-oppressive, non-oppositional and non-dominating framework as a starting point? In other words, is it possible to theorise the constitution of black identity as a form of creative and generative work?

One way of approaching this task is in terms of the relation between oppression and power. A major aim throughout this thesis is to contest the assumption that the history of oppression equates directly with the history of *powerlessness*. Put the other way, I will challenge the idea that power is necessarily a negation or violation of the agent's capacities for creativity. Even in extreme situations, the history of the black diaspora has been one where agency, collective expression are immanent to structures of oppression. From this perspective, identity becomes a function of experience lived through creative embodied praxis. To understand this more clearly, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by power.



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Synthesising the theories of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to explore how built forms of architecture and urban design mediate social practices of power, Kim Dovey (1999) suggests that the term "power" is widely used and yet misused. To avoid any misunderstanding, Dovey distinguishes between two basic forms of power - power *to* and power *over*. For Dovey, power *to* is the more fundamental of the two. The word derives from the Latin *potere* - "to be able" (the link is more obvious in French - where "pouvoir" still means both "to be able" and "power"). Power *to* represents the capacity to act. In contemporary terms, power *to* is often expressed as 'empowerment'. However, Dovey contends that there is a tendency to privilege power *over* as the more fundamental form. Power *over* refers to the ability to use the capacities of others to enhance one's own empowerment, and to act upon others through political forces, social and cultural control of the body. Again, Dovey holds that because we think of power in this secondary, limitative sense as primary, we tend to think of power and freedom as *opposed*. On the contrary, for Dovey, 'Oppression and liberation are the two sides of the power coin' (1999: 9). Following Foucault, Dovey holds that subjectivity is constituted around the vectors of constraint *and* liberty. That is, the subject, Foucault argues 'is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty' (1988:50). Throughout this thesis, I shall argue that power is first of all positive in form and concerns power *to*. Of course, one person's active power is another person's power *over*; however, we shall not make the mistake of confusing the one with the other, but viewing them as intertwined. For Foucault, power is 'a set of actions upon other actions', in which the relationship between acting subjects are sustained through the recognition and maintenance of the

subject who acts (cited in Crossley 1996: 105). In this account of power, power as limitation, as an external imposition, assumes a subject with the potential to act. This means that agency becomes a prerequisite for power as domination.

Through the distinction between power as capacity and action, and power as limitation and constraint, we are already beginning to show that black identity is constituted firstly as a form of empowerment. That is, power in a positive sense, involving agents with the capacity to act, takes primacy over its obverse: power as the imprint of institutional, historical and cultural forces. This means that a construction of black identity emerges not through the logic of domination but through capacities that enables agents to alter their existential context and create an alternative mode of being. Later on in the thesis, I shall show that this positive capacity is dialogic in form, incorporating what I will call *antiphonal* processes. Black diasporic identity and experience is therefore figured in this thesis not in terms of oppositionality but antiphony. In order to achieve this, I will have to adopt a philosophical method that is conducive to these purposes.

### **Why Phenomenology?**

The privilege accorded to power as empowerment and agency in this thesis is framed methodologically and philosophically in terms of a *phenomenological* approach, as formulated by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Phenomenology is an appropriate method for my purposes here because it does not assume a metaphysical framework within which all subsequent operations take place. That is, phenomenology



brackets the question of subject and object, in order to address the nature of the *phenomenon*. The phenomenon is simply 'that which appears' - something which happens and is yet to be explained.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon is therefore not merely a *subjective* entity - something which appears only to the subject. On the other hand, the phenomenon is not merely an *object* - something that stands absolutely outside the subject. What is crucial about phenomenology is that it is about the phenomenon that emerges; as a philosophical method, it does not make preliminary assumptions about the phenomenon. Instead, the phenomenon is that which has *to be explained*. Neither science nor poetry, universal or particular, the phenomenon is simply 'that which occurs' that requires explanation. As I shall argue, it is precisely because phenomenology, in the form which is useful for my purposes here, makes no initial claims on the part of either the subject or the object, that both are seen to be originally and essentially intertwined. The key element here, as we shall see, is that of *embodiment*; phenomenology can think outside of dualist schemas of thought because it is a philosophy of lived bodily action (Fraleigh 1987).

One objection to this way of characterising phenomenology would be to say that phenomenology's starting point - the phenomenon - must in itself involve metaphysical assumptions. It is through answering this objection that the radical nature of a phenomenological methodology begins to emerge. The only major assumption phenomenology makes in order to begin is that it is always *existential* in its scope. That is, phenomenology, the study of the phenomenon, always begins with the facts of our

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed account about the nature of phenomenological method is offered in the preface to Merleau-Ponty's book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962).

existence. Now, the first form of our existence is lived experience. When I wake up in the morning, there is a background of recognition, certain forms of discourses, certain forms of latent histories, which confronts me and works through me. I do not relate to my being a diasporic subject as an object: a historical or sociological or cultural object, instead, it is through my lived experience in concrete situations that I apprehend the facticity of my diasporicity. Through phenomenology then, the metaphysical assumptions regarding the status of the subject or the object is bracketed out in favour of the phenomenon as it appears in the midst of my existence, as a form of lived experience or as Lewis Gordon calls it as a "situation" (1997:3). In sum, prior to *representation*, prior to conscious articulation even, phenomenology's central aim is to mine the rich layers of lived experience - of how the world appears.

As I have indicated already, it is clear that as soon as we begin upon this phenomenological path, the issue of embodiment crops up. The crucial thing to understand is that for a phenomenologist such as Merleau-Ponty, the body is not first of all and most fundamentally *physical*. As the distinction made by feminists between "the body" and "embodiment" demonstrates, in existential phenomenology, the physical body is preceded by an entity that is embedded within a life-world or existential context. Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty, as we shall see in more detail in chapter one, the body in this existential sense is not merely the passive receptacle of the forces of culture and history, time and place. Rather, there is a reciprocal co-determination between body and world. While I never experience my body as an object, it can be turned into an object through limitations imposed by external forces so that I become alienated from my body.



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For Sondra Horton Fraleigh, 'Embodiment is thus the ground for all experienced values, for both intimacy and alienation, freedom and limitation' (1987:17). Furthermore, she suggests that the lived body is not determined by limitations - my capacity to choose and act allows me to create myself and attempt to change my situation.

The emphasis on embodiment in Merleau-Ponty's thought provokes comparison with the work of the Foucault who stresses the role of the body in philosophy. A cursory interpretation of Foucault's view on the corporeal is that the body is simply "imprinted" upon by history and political forces - in effect, a passive *tabular rasa* that is re-written anew within each historical discontinuity (Levin 1989). It is in fact the case that Foucault's account offers a more nuanced account of the body (Gedalof 1999, Crossley 1996). Although, like Foucault, Merleau-Ponty offers an account of the body that is both active and acted upon, the difference between them is that they emphasize different aspects of embodiment. As Crossley writes, 'Merleau-Ponty tends to concentrate upon the active pole, while Foucault tends to stress the acted-upon pole' (1996: 106). As a result, both theorists have been charged with either paying too much emphasis on the imprint of power (Foucault) or insufficient attention to the effect of power relations on the body (Merleau-Ponty). While I think there is a degree of validity to both these claims, I want to show, at least through the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, that this is not entirely correct. I will do this by responding to two common claims made against his thought.

First of all, to his critics, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology appears naively incapable of accounting for the imposition of dominant forms of power over the subject and therefore, incapable of showing how power works through different modes of subjectivity (see Burkitt 1999, Young 1989, Butler 1989). I would argue on the contrary that in stressing the primacy of power as empowerment, Merleau-Ponty offers a sophisticated account of how we empower ourselves in terms of freedom and historical action. Now, when Merleau-Ponty is charged with the failure to offer an account of power relations, what this means, as we have seen above, is that he does not offer an account of power as limitation, power as domination, power as negation. While Merleau-Ponty is overwhelmingly optimistic about the ways in which power works through the subject, this is not to say that he completely ignores the ways in which power can frame schematic bodily freedoms. According to Crossley, in both *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), and *Humanism and Terror* (1969), Merleau-Ponty does 'include consideration of the political situation of agents in relations of oppression and control' (1996: 105). Merleau-Ponty posits that our capacities as embodied beings are always embedded within historical and social life-worlds that give us certain affordances, directives and limitations. We can see that the relationship between power *to* and power *over* is already assumed in Merleau-Ponty's thought. In any case, Merleau-Ponty's critics are right only in the sense that the relationship between dominant modes of power and agency is not fully explored when compared to Foucault's work, especially in his later work. Nonetheless, as I shall show, the account of power as capacity offered by Merleau-Ponty is particularly useful for theorising how black diasporic identity has evolved, how it survives, recreates itself and is manifested in the public realm. Enriching Baldwin's



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response to the question of black identity, it allows us to understand how in each case of historical, socio-cultural domination, agency and action are prerequisite. While I am aware that this position may incur the charge of romanticisation of the subject matter presented in this thesis, *not* to insert agency and action at the centre of structures of domination leads inevitably to the problematic conflation of the history of oppression with an history powerlessness mentioned already. Moreover, it creates a situation where certain action by a socially dominated group is automatically assigned a subversive status.

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Secondly, historically, phenomenology has held the view that consciousness is intentional. Consciousness as intentionality, allows the perceiving subject to organise activities and 'stimuli according to present purposeful perception - purposeful because it is directed toward, and involved in, its objects' (Fraleigh 1987:15). Edmund Husserl, the so-called "father of phenomenology", stressed that intentionality as construed in phenomenology is not psychologistic but about a universal intentionality; what he calls a "theoretical consciousness". While Husserlian intentionality is not psychologistic because it is not about individual expressions of intention, but about a universal structure, this move nonetheless has left many critics of phenomenology with the lingering idea that phenomenology is still about the individual and their intentional consciousness.

Because of its focus on the intentional consciousness phenomenology has therefore been charged for being too voluntaristic or subjectivistic. I would argue that because Merleau-Ponty's provides an account of the co-determination between actors and world,

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intentional agency itself is ambiguous. This ambiguity occurs in a causal sense in that there is no linear causality, there is no original  $x$  - whether this is a world or a person that starts meaning of. Instead, Merleau-Ponty's account of agency can be thought of as involving a loom that weaves the world into meaning. In other words, there is no one origin or set of effects, there is just movement, co-dependence, co-horizon and co-evality of being and world. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied intentionality is not individualistic or voluntaristic in any way. Rather, his brand of phenomenology shows how the body's intentionality needs a situation in which to act from. However, the specific expressions of intentional behaviour can be disrupted or affected by the world. Again, the reverse is true. The individual can and is able to imprint his/her own image onto the world. An individual's capacity to project her image onto the world is also possible precisely because the world is receptive to that projection at that particular moment. From this perspective, we are forced to rethink hegemonic power structures such as patriarchy and white supremacy as necessarily imprinting itself on a passive body. Rather than viewing these systems as revolving around a master plan or blue print that is imposed, it is more productive to look at how groups and agents generate certain autonomous patterns of being, producing sites of struggle, contestation *and* transformation. In other words, complicity and freedom of autonomy, freedom to act differently is always available within each existential context.



## **Telling Stories**

Having said all the above, it is however important not to underestimate the relationship between power and the history. As a general tendency, written history is a reconstruction and representation of the past filtered through the lens of the dominant group (Nora 1989) in an attempt to 'make the world in their own image' (Baldwin 1951: 49-50). According to Pierre Bourdieu, history is the effort by 'monopolistic power to impose [their] legitimate categories of perception and appreciation' (1993: 106) onto the world. Legitimacy is often derived primarily through the valorisation of textual or inscriptive modes as a reliable source for the transmission of the past and in its wake the preservation of hegemonic worldview. Such a way of construing the history of a people is however put into crisis by what Kirsten Hastrup terms "Other histories" (1992). Conventional history becomes the history of crisis - the crisis of violating experience and difference. It is therefore not a coincidence that part of feminists and black theorists' project has been to contest the selective telling and representation of stories about the past. In different ways, they have argued that orthodox historiographies have neglected the role played by women, black people and differently marginalised groups in the production, transmission and transformation of cultural traditions. For feminists, this action is undertaken not without recognising the diversities among women that necessitate attention to women's multiple and changing histories.

One of the forms this undermining of the relationship between power and history has taking is through personal testimony. For example, the "slave narrative" contests a

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universal meaning for slavery through the recording of the intricacies of an individual life and thus a reconfiguration of slavery (Morrison 1990). In her work on the Brazilian dance form *Samba*, Barbara Browning writes that beyond the inscriptive mode, the black diaspora has used dance as a 'form of cultural record keeping' (1995: xxiii). In the context where the telling of history is aligned with the power over another, it becomes imperative to tell invisible histories, subcultural activities and other forms that are not recognised as part of official history. In this thesis, through focusing on the agency of black subjectivity as expressed in such cultural form as Jamaican dancehall culture, I am attempting to challenge and change the way in which, through the filter of history, we discuss the agency of the oppressed. For example, if we take the experience of women in dancehall culture, and position them simply as the victim of patriarchal power because of the misogyny and homophobia of the predominately male DJs, then we reproduce that patriarchal power at the level of historical discourse itself. In so doing, what women do and how they respond to the culture is effectively silenced or encountered only through the stories of the male DJs. However, once we actually start to talk about what they did, the rituals they constructed, the patterns of movement they choreographed, the way they adorned themselves, through historical discourse, we start to actually challenge certain conceptions of agency itself.

Through rethinking historical action, we begin to see how the way we tell a story about history often reflects the way we think about agency. One example that comes to mind is around the writing of black female sexuality in slavery. In her text *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks suggest that the sexual universe of the enslaved



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female is one of sexual violence and domination. She argues that 'The female slave lived in constant awareness of her sexual vulnerability and in a perpetual fear that any male, white or black, might single her out to assault and victimize (1982: 24). This image of a victim of sexual oppression dominates writings on the black woman in slavery. While sexual domination was a significant part of the slave history, writers such as Nancie Caraway (1991) and Barbara Omolade (1983) suggest that this did not define entirely black female sexuality. Citing the work of Omolade, Caraway points to a more complicated sexual universe where the female slave was entangled within a 'web of cruelty and pleasure, love and hate' (1991: 84). She suggests that in any account of enslaved female sexuality we need to have two pictures in our imagination simultaneously. One of enslaved females as 'victims of systematic sexual violence, as no other American women have been' and the more uncomfortable perspective of a 'sexual agents [...] who brought their erotic power to the beds of both white and Black lovers' (ibid: 84). In this way, black female sexual history is not wholly defined by oppression and the cruelty of slavery, but of a history reflecting 'the juncture where the public and private spheres, as well as personal and political oppression, meet' (Caraway 1991:85). These two accounts then boil down to how a particular person or group acted and responded to events within their world historical culture and the way in which subsequent generation retell the story. Here then, history becomes less about public events and grand achievements and more about how they relate to private acts.

Therefore, if I privilege the agency of the black diaspora to act differently or against the grain of normative imposition, it is because I want to redraw our starting point for

theorising agency. In this way, the starting point for agency does not rely upon an originary violation and domination, but on the agents capacities to act in a world that is both constituting and constitutive through antiphonal processes.

### Structure of the Thesis

In Chapter One, I develop a number of opening thoughts and themes that frame my general argument throughout this thesis. I begin by outlining the notion of diaspora as it currently circulates in contemporary critical theory. I then develop a critique of this by suggesting that it lacks an adequate account of embodiment as it relates to experience of dislocation. In so doing, I argue for the primacy of the body as an index of lived experience and its relation to issues of emotions. I develop this argument through a focus on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, suggesting that his account of embodiment as the locus of being-in-the-world allows us to think about a diasporic identity that is grounded within the layers of tradition, and therefore enables us to see how dispossession impact upon the emotional horizon of dispossessed people. I will claim that in a sense, Merleau-Ponty's thought allows for a delimitation of corporeal *freedom*, which once violated by the historical event of transportation, enslavement and colonisation, has the effect of altering how we understand the black experience. The importance of Merleau-Ponty is finally challenged by the work of Frantz Fanon. I will show how Fanon introduces the idea of a historico-racial schema which undercuts the freedom of the corporeal schema assumed by Merleau-Ponty. Fanon argues that the freedom and



autonomous agency assumed in Merleau-Ponty's notion is undermined by the violence of race.

Having set the stage of this study, chapter two concentrates on the origin and evolution of black diasporic identity. This question is taken up through the role ships and the Middle Passage has played in the formation of black diasporic identity as figured in the work of two key thinkers of the black diaspora: Hortense Spillers and Paul Gilroy. Spillers proposes a violent discontinuity between an African origin and a New World home that is severed by the ships in the Middle Passage. Discontinuity here operates as a violation upon what would have been a continued tradition with a fixed origin. I contest this view by suggesting that discontinuity is not absolute. Rather, the Middle Passage and the ship provide a different way of conceptualising origin and tradition. In order to further this criticism, I discussed the figuration of the ship as explored by Gilroy. Gilroy relates specific historical journeys and crossings in order to construct an account of the contemporary diasporic situation as a complex medium of exchange – the Black Atlantic. I take issue with this position by returning to Spillers' attention to historical specificity. I then begin to outline a *third* position between Spillers' absolute rupture constitutive of the Black Atlantic experience and Gilroy's painless relativism by introducing questions of memory and antiphony.

Chapter three explores and substantiates the questions of memory raised in the second chapter. I argue that we can understand the performance of everyday life in black diasporic cultures only through attention to memoration and remembrance. Memory

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here does not involve a privileged past nor is it a cognitive representation, rather it is an index of the conditions of the present being-in-the-world. Memory therefore operates through its capacity to articulate contemporary demands. In this thesis diasporic black memory is presented as a *rhythmic-gestural pattering* in order to explore how the black diaspora expresses and articulates its historical, cultural and social world. I do this by outlining aspects of African formal structures animating and inflecting black diasporic expressive cultures. Having explored how memories become embodied and are linked to the taking up of these African formal structures in the diaspora, towards the end, I start to suggest that these formal elements can only be meaningful when they are located within the existential context of each diasporic community.

In the fourth chapter I expand this point by arguing that the reworking, transformation and rehearsing of complex socio-economic and cultural positioning in the black diaspora is expressed through the celebration and performance of the adorned dancing body. I do so by performing a reading of Jamaican Ragga Dancehall culture which reads it as an attempt by participants to re-write and re-claim their body as a site of erotic recognition and desire in an effort to reconstruct and remake their world in a world indifferent to their plight. I argue that the carnivalesque excess of the culture has to be understood as a response to the conditions of their experience. This response is predicated on the attempt to create alternative survival strategy. In this chapter the issue of the relationship between survival and the imagination is explored. I will argue that within this culture survival is not grounded in the satisfaction of physical needs (alone), rather, survival is about desire and the limits of the imagination. It is about desiring to desire; to be given



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the freedom to desire. It is about becoming autonomous and becoming what one can become. Women in dancehall push beyond the limits of material survival towards an imaginative potential. It is at this point that the imagination leads to subversion, perversion, vulgarisation and an aestheticisation of the ugly. Such a reading will allow us to explain how adornment, fetishism, excess, exaggerated dance movements operate among those with so little.

Questions of visibility and invisibility are important in any understanding of the diasporic situation of black people. Existing accounts of vision have been decidedly negative (often with good reason). In the final chapter, using dance as a paradigm for motility, I challenge the dualist ontology of the gaze in Fanon's text which assumes a negative relationship between subject and object. I suggest that the motile body in dance can disrupt the Fanonian racial gaze (thereby resisting the power and fixity that has been accorded the gaze). I show that Merleau-Ponty offers a more redemptive alternative to the paralysis of the gaze proposed by Fanon. Here, the gaze offers a potential for erotic communication and mutual recognition through shared signification. I offer a detailed phenomenological analysis of the film *Dancehall Queen* in light of this mutuality. I argue that the dancer in the film teases the gaze, her performance subverts the power relations of the gaze and transforms it into one of mutual interaction, in a way that blurs the distinction between the spectator and the actor. Through what I am calling the 'female rebuff' the dancer communicates directly back to and with the audience. In this way, the power relations of 'the gaze' that are often assumed in contemporary film theory

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are challenged, and a more ambiguous, *antiphonal* account of looking relations is inserted as its alternative.

## **Chapter 1: 'The World is Our Market, Heaven is Home': Embodiment and Diasporicity**

*An imagined, all too real dialogue:*

"Where are you from?"

"London"

"No, but where are you *really* from?"

"Stoke Newington"

"Okay, your parents, where are they from?"

"Same-place I am from"

"What about your grandparents, where are they from?" - and it goes on, and on!

Diaspora and embodiment: two terms that have separately gained currency in contemporary critical thought. However, the relations *between* them have yet to be explicitly explored. This is the task ahead. Diaspora describes the dispersion of a group from an "original" emplacement. What is key is that this movement away from and to a place can only be understood via a third mediating term: the body or embodiment. In my view we can no longer continue to theorise these terms in an adequate way without acknowledging their material and conceptual interrelatedness. Place and body support and belong to each other. As Edward Casey notes, 'there is no place without body - without the physical or psychical traces of body - so *there is no body without place*' (Casey 1993: 104 author's emphasis). Bodies shift in meaning as they shift in place; and



## Chapter 1: Embodiment and Diasporicity

'are marked as different and often as negatively different to the dominant cultural system' in which they are located, 'producing a dissonance or gap between one's practices and affects' (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993: 704). Places construct the body and are constructed in turn by embodied lived experience. For example, the black female body signifies differently in London, Lagos, Cuba, or Jamaica. According to Radhika Mohanram, 'In each situation the signifier 'black' resonates with the history, culture and power dynamics that are particular to that place' (1999: 52). Although this is the case, one would never guess from perusing recent studies on diasporicity. Rather, one never fails to encounter the familiar litany of relational terms which refer to (without unpacking) body-place dynamics such as borders, deterritorialisation, displacement, hybridity, multi-locality and the politics of location, as though there is an anxiety about missing something out. Or, when the litany is not in view, there is an attempt to distinguish between theory, discourse and the historical experience of diaspora (Clifford 1994, Brah 1996). Such approaches will remain abstractions unless they are returned to the body that grounds them.

As an example of such abstraction, in his essay 'Diaspora', James Clifford observes that the rise of the concept of diaspora in critical theory requires a distinction to be made between "diaspora theories", "diasporic discourses" and "distinct historical experiences of diaspora" (1994: 244). He admits, however, that it is difficult to maintain them in any absolute terms because they slide into each other. He argues that this slippage concerns the different conceptual and physical maps and histories in which the terms are embedded. For instance, to theorise the Black diaspora is to begin to engage with the

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Middle Passage of slavery, racial capitalism, colonial pillaging, post-colonial conditions and contemporary European racism. This engagement also requires attention to be paid to the violent representational regimes that legitimatise such activities, as well as the spiritual and psychic effects on the experience of those under its ruse. For Avtar Brah (1996) however, it is precisely *because* of these slippages between the historical, the conceptual and the experiential, that it becomes necessary to map out the usefulness and the limits of the word. This, Brah argues, allow us to understand its theoretical purchase. While these distinctions are important for heuristic purposes, the reasons and motivations for the distinctions remain unclear.

In this chapter, I will argue that the distinctions offered by Brah and Clifford *inter alia* can only be resolved by a return in theory to the body-place dynamics that ground experience. I want to suggest that the Black diaspora, or any other diaspora for that matter, must be understood first of all as *felt, lived and experienced corporeally*. That is, to theorise the evolution of the black diaspora in the Western Hemisphere involves examining how the sinister power of white supremacy has organised and modified the lived and living body of experience through a denial of black humanity (Gordon 1995). As we shall see, the African body is inserted into European discourse as a lack, a savage/exotic other, a sub-human economic and ideological category devoid of any history (Wolfe 1982, Fanon 1961, Mills 1998). These factors influence the construction of diasporic black identity. However, and in line with the argument throughout this thesis, the black body must not be seen solely as the passive victim of white supremacist power. Rather, by drawing upon resources from their African past, as wells as their encounters



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with other cultures in the New World, diasporic Africans actively contest the inscription and forces of white supremacist power. Paget Henry has written that the European evasion of black humanity was met with a corresponding reassertion of black humanity. 'Europeans and Afro-Caribbeans' he argues 'were increasingly locked into a historically structured game of imperial and anti-imperial struggle' (1997a: 27). Moreover, as Alphonso Lingis has written, 'Bodies that are forcibly subjected produce power in their turn, devise their evasions, resistance, snares, ambushes, ruses and mockeries; they signal, feint, and delude' (1994: 54). From the revolutionary act of the Haitian Jacobins described by C.L.R James (1963) to slave poisoning (Bush 1990) and religious and expressive cultural forms (Robinson 1983), black diasporic agents continue to confirm the ontological inseparability of freedom and constraint. The presence of and various projects by black diasporic agents to assert the agency of their humanity in the New World thus introduce fissure and contradiction into white enlightenment project (Walker 1993, Gilroy 1993), thereby transforming it in radical ways through cultural syncretism (Mintz and Price 1976). In so doing, the course of (diasporic) historical action itself is altered.

The black diaspora *must* therefore be seen as denoting a relational network of experiences that are sited *in* and *through* the body. Whether this experience is of colonial brutality or the resistance against that scene of 'pure physical experience of negation' (Scarry 1985: 52), it is the body that experiences and rejects these forces. My core argument is that the lived, situated, powerful body is the activational site of black diasporic experience and all its constitutive elements: memory and tradition, repetition and difference, melancholy



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and nostalgia, continuity and mutation, emplacement and displacement, pain and pleasure, space and spacing, roots and routes, time and timing.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter and the rest of the thesis, I emphasize that diaspora is *not* an abstract relation concerning the spacing of the subject across time; rather, diasporicity is registered in every gesture, movement and comportment of the diasporic body. Diasporicity engages actual motile bodies and bodily practices which have been (actually or by association) "rooted" in a place, and which by being uprooted and re-routed to another place produce a sort of dis-positioning and re-positioning. Embodied orientations are dis-oriented, and bodies of culture can no longer continue as they did. Or rather, they have to be reoriented and remobilised afresh in each new location. As I shall show, this imperative to rework a cultural patterning according to its new context always involves a relationship between the remembrance of traces of the "old" practices and the process of engagement, interaction with and (re)reading of the new situation. This ability to extend and transform itself, I will argue in the thesis, is part of the rich African cultural legacy that was transported, brewed and transformed in the diasporic situation (Simone 1989). The relationship between African trace structures and New World encounters is clearly illustrated in Stuart Hall's account of black Caribbean identities. Hall writes,

we might think of black Caribbean identities as 'framed' by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture. Caribbean identities always

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<sup>1</sup> I am thinking here about the non-linear and disjunctive temporality expressed in James Snead's notion of the "cut" in his discussion of the use of repetition in black cultures. The "cut" is a beat that continually cuts back to its begin but with a new take.

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have to be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes. The one gives us some grounding in, some continuity with the past. The second reminds us that what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity: the peoples dragged into slavery, transportation, colonisation, migration, came predominately from Africa. (1990: 226-227)

This chapter suggests that recent theoretical perspectives on black diasporic identity lack an account of embodiment and the way it grounds social practices, experiences, relations of power and habits of being. Theorising the diasporic experience, we are forced to engage with and acknowledge the living body of experience. Failure to do this, I suggest, results in a situation whereby the ontological imperatives for the physical and psychic effects of rootedness and routedness cannot in any meaningful way be adequately addressed. This is apparent in Brah's (1996) inability to substantiate the reasons and motives for the distinctions she makes between the conceptual, experiential and discursive aspects of diaspora. Of course, she begins to allude towards this when she calls for a multi-axial performative conception of power. However, her text remains overly abstract. Only by theorising the embodied diasporic agent can we be clear as to why such distinctions are made and why the experience of displacement can be experienced with such 'ambiguity *and* anguish' (Berman 1983: 15 my emphasis). Ontology, or at least a social ontology, the study of the "being" of diasporic agents, allows for a comprehension of its attendant emotions that is more than just psychologistic or individualistic. The emotions of diaspora are diagrams of the deep intertwining



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between dis/placement and its effects on reflective and pre-reflective accounts of the self. That is, auto-constructions of the self or community of selves are affected by the emotions or moods produced through displacement. 'Emotion', according to M.L.Lyon and J.M. Barbalet 'is precisely the experience of embodied sociality' (1994: 48). On a philosophical level then, I argue for an ontological structure to diaspora. This enables me to make a general claim about a construction of subjectivity and identity that is neither rooted in fixity nor dissipated as a form of deterritorialised nomadism. Moreover, when we begin to understand diasporicity as an ontological condition, the full force of the damaging consequences and violence of transportation, enslavement and indifference to black humanity comes into sharp relief. Again, I will reiterate that on an experiential level, this way of conceptualising identity works *through* the body. Discursively, bodies are encoded into a world and ways of being that organise it. For the diasporic black body, this organisation bears a distanced and deferred relation to a (real or an imaginary) home. I do so by offering a phenomenology of diaspora. By referring to "phenomenology" here, I hope to emphasise the phenomenon of embodied experience over and against its more abstract conceptualisations. Diasporic black identity is written on the surface of the body and it is read through it. Beyond this, I will in moments of this chapter be engaging directly with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962).



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### The Field of Diaspora

Recent efforts to find new models for understanding changes in social, territorial and cultural reproduction of group identity (Appadurai 1996:48) have resulted in the proliferation of movement metaphors: hybridity, border, transcultural, intermixture, politics of location and diaspora. In this section I focus on diaspora because in a sense it references all the above. Diaspora is an ancient term generally associated with the historic experience of the Jews after a forced expulsion from their "historic homeland"<sup>2</sup> and their dispersion across many lands, wherein exile (*Galut*) had become a way of life and (death) itself (Kitaj 1989: 35, Blanchot 1969). But as Kitaj states 'Jews do not own Diaspora; they are not the only diasporists by a long shot' (1989: 21). Although its association with a Jewish historical complex remains, diaspora now articulates 'a discourse that is travelling or hybridising in new global conditions' (Clifford 1994: 249). Or as Khachig Tölölian observes, the term now 'shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community' (1991: 4-5). For Clifford, this severing from its historical mooring can be attributed to changes brought about by decolonisation and technological innovations which 'encourage multilocal attachments, dwelling, and travelling within and across nations' (1994: 249).

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<sup>2</sup>Some writers have begun to suggest that 'an alternative story of Israel, closer it would seem, to the readings of Judaism lived for two thousands years, begins with a people forever unconnected with a particular land, a people that calls into question the idea that a people must have a land in order to be a people' (Boyrains 1993:718). This assertion is a challenge to the monolithic, destructive and violent territorialism of Zionists claim of an original homeland. Citing Davis, the Boyrains suggest that the state of Israel was created by Jews in exile. For the father of Jewry, Abraham was deterritorialized.

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For many diaspora theorists, the voguish appeal of the term has to do with the fact that it offers a novel way of understanding new forms of sociality and experience that registers 'a spatialised politics of identity grounded in a particular notion of space' (Keith and Pile 1993: 20). In so doing, the concept of diaspora has the potential to challenge identities constructed around the nation-state, racial purity, patriarchal ideals and essentialising discourses of origin and home. For Gilroy, one of the values of the term is that it 'breaks the dogmatic focus on discrete *national* dynamics which has characterised so much modern Euro-American cultural thought' (1993: 6). Several writers, however, have begun to suggest that diaspora can and often does become the very site for the re-articulation and perpetuation of such discourses (Hall 1990, Grewal 1994, Clifford 1994, Dhaliwal 1994). These writers suggest that people often become more self-consciously nationalistic when they move away from their locus of origin than when they stay at home. This is especially the case when diasporicity is chauvinistically aligned to a notion of a lost origin or a trans-historical essential unity and therefore 'the need to recover a homeland or identity' (Wollen 1994: 189). In so doing, it can provide 'the fuel for new ethnic conflicts' (Appadurai 1996:49). However, when not equated with a chauvinistic celebration or yearning for land, dispersion, according to Blanchot, 'also clears the way for a different exigency and finally forbids the temptation of Unity-Identity' (1969: 126). As such, it has the capacity to generate and explain new forms of sociality, which are connected to trans-national flows of people, information communication technologies, capital, goods and cultural forms. These forms are an outcome of the search for profit by trans-national corporations, who transform, often with negative effect, traditional ways of living. According to Robin Cohen, the emergence and impact of new technology on



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social and spatial relations means that 'transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims' (1996: 516). In this way, 'a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through artefacts and through shared imagination' (ibid: 516).

Diasporas articulate the unfolding of multiple, difficult and sensuous narratives of speech and body, of identities, desires and communities on the make. They involve journeys people sustain by myths and stories of an original shared homeland and communal memory, without necessarily nurturing dreams of a physical return (although physical return is a central feature of diaspora). Clifford has suggested that while the evocation of an originary, pristine communal culture is often important to diasporic communities, 'a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as the projection of a specific origin' (1994: 250).

These narratives of ongoing oppression, personal ordeal, and communal solidarity in the creation and transformation of groups must be distinguished from the voguish elitism of the global currency of the postmodern, fragmented, ungended nomadic subject (Wolff 1993, hooks 1991). The diasporic subject should not be put in close company with the ideal of the jet-set, multi-passported (often white) western traveller (Gedalof 1996), for whom the experience of crossing borders is purely pleasurable, a genteel form of 'eating the other' (hooks 1992, Mohanram 1999). Diasporas are not the same as casual, self-exploratory forms of travel; they are journeys people are forced to make. They 'are essentially about settling down, about putting roots "elsewhere"' (Brah 1996: 182). The

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crossing of borders for those bound to diaspora, is more likely to involve immigration anxieties - the refusal of visas, detention, waiting, rejection, expulsion - rather than the prospect of a pleasurable consumption of alterity. Inaugurated by forced migration, economic necessity and cultural imperialism, "travel", according to bell hooks, is not a word that can easily be evoked about the Black diaspora (1991). This is not to say that diasporic black agents have not engaged in travels that are associated with questions of self-exploration into new territories (Gilroy 1993). Rather, a distinction needs to be made between forms of travel and the status of the travellers within the imagination of their host culture, as well as their social positioning in their country of origin.

The black diaspora refers to the cultures, identities, spaces and memories that were created as a result of whole-scale commerce in African bodies and the flow of ideas and information across the Atlantic Ocean. Central to the notion are words like "origin", "departure", "voyage", "arrival", "residence", "search", "loss", "longing", "memory", "continuity and discontinuity". They are words that resonate in all experience of journeys, issues that any traveller must confront and contend with. They force us to ask questions about the motives, the purpose, and the conditions of the journey as well as the experiences of arrival and settlement (Selvon 1956). However, for communities *forced* onto the road or sea, such enquiry prompts a variety of questions. These questions are embedded in complex factors which involve histories and experience of racial violence, economic and cultural colonisation, global capital forces and multiple forms of migration. These experiences are embodied and embedded in racist discourses where race is inscribed on the skin. Increasingly, these questions are further complicated by the



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resurgence in the over-developed countries of selective policies that make a division between skilled and unskilled prospective immigrants. Encountering such questions requires us to attend to the following issues: of landing, of falling, of failing, of being "Othered", of displacement, of restlessness, of feeling un-settled and then perhaps reaching an "eventual" rest, and a new home. This has created a situation, even a feeling, where hope and hopelessness, fear and desire, security and insecurity, pain and pleasure, loss and longing, are both a menacing and pleasurable reality for the black diasporic subject. These emotions are responses every diasporic subject faces - consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly.

It is therefore important to stress that diasporic journeys, if not the outcome of genocide, persecution, slavery, indentureship or ineffable terrors, are often at the least movements forced by the global flow of labour caused by the "debt boomerang" (George 1992). It is within the context of these painful trajectories that black diasporic communities are formed and multiple attachments and "lateral" connections are forged (Clifford 1994). These uprootings have meant that, out of necessity, they rework and transform their cultures and the "host" cultures (Sobel 1987), and bear witness to the unfolding of new, multiple and sensuous as well as dreadful cultural narratives.

Of course it is necessary to emphasise the specific trajectories that have helped to 'similarise and differentiate between and across changing diasporic constellations' (Brah 1996: 183), without which we are unable to specify the relations of power that have produced them. Brah has usefully reminded us that differences in socio-economic capital

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and modes of arrival have different effects on how diasporic communities navigate and negotiate the host culture. For example, she highlights the need to make a distinction between South Asians from the sub-continent and East African Asians (who are products of a double diasporicity). Such distinctions allow us to understand the complex responses to the reality of poverty (or otherwise), the agony of uprootedness, isolation from other segments of their communities and the attendant exclusion and inclusion from the civic life of the host culture within different diasporic groups.

### **Spatialising Diasporic Temporality**

If we accept then that diaspora and diasporic experiences involve the difference of *geography* (in the literal sense of writing the earth) and history and the experience of displacement, its binding reference cannot necessarily be equated with the "original" home. The original home itself is always displaced by time and the space of the present. Diasporic communities develop and diverge from the culture of origins as the original culture shifts and is preserved in archaic or transformed way in its diasporic sites (see Warner-Lewis 1991 & 1996, Houk 1995). This calls for a different account of origin, of home, and all that is associated with it: cultural expressions, artefacts, gender norms and meanings. For example, among the Yorubas of Western Nigeria, in the *edun* drumming ensemble, the lead drum is known as *Iya Ilu* (the mother drum) and it is the most important of the ensemble. All the drums in an ensemble are tied or set to a particular tone, and they act as accompaniment to the *Iya Ilu* which is untied. This allows the player to vary the tone and to instruct the other drummers and the dancers alike.



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However, as this drumming technique travelled across the ocean, the mother drum is transmogrified by gender into the "master drum", reflecting the cultural values of its new location. Any account of origin then, must have at its core a differentiation that is perpetually unfolding across history and geography. Therefore, the motivation in the present to "repeat the same" of what is past or revisit the ancestral home becomes at the least problematical, if not impossible. The original home cannot be recreated as a perfect copy because it always exists at an insurmountable distance. As Stuart Hall writes, 'The original 'Africa' is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible' (1990: 231).

However, it is necessary to recognise that this claim about the impossibility of returning home is often resisted within diasporic groups by redemptive discourses of home as the promised land. In such cases, the imagined ancestral home is invested with mythic value. For example, G. C. Montilus (1993) recounted two contrasting Haitian stories that have persisted as enduring truths about Africa. When a man wishes to boast about his valour he would claim that he was *neg Ginni* (a black person from Guinea); and if this man wants to insult another, he would refer to him as a *neg Congo* (a black person from Congo). In this story, "Guinea" symbolises the mythical origin of valour and virtue whereas "Congo" personifies meekness and docility. Montilus notes that these contrasting myths each allude to 'a mythical place of origin that had become an ideal of resistance against slavery, its suffering, and its humiliation' (ibid). Guinea is seen as the site for an eventual return which will secure identity. It is often assumed that such a security will involve a journey back home 'even if it means pushing other people into the

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sea' (Hall 1990: 235). For Hall, such a conceptualisation of a return is 'the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity'. We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backward-looking conception of diaspora - and the complicity of the West with it' (ibid:235).

One of the values of current writing on diaspora lies in arguing against discourses that prescribe a return to the original home. In doing so, writers such as Brah, Hall and Clifford propose that such discourses cannot completely conceal the fact that the conditions of displacement - forced labour and migration, indentureship, racial capitalism, colonisation and imperialism - constitute a critical matrix in which diasporic cultures were produced (Kelley and Lemelle 1994: 9). Failure to recognise this constitutive matrix can often lead to those discourses having a distorted conception of history. Here, we have only to cite the example of a history passed through the redemptive filter of a certain form of afrocentric discourse in which an idyllic-Kemitic unchanging, timeless Africa is propagated. This notion of an unmediated primordial continuity between pre-European colonial Africa to the present in Afrocentric discourse is one of the key targets of Paul Gilroy's critique in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). While Gilroy recognises the 'lingering power of specifically racialised forms of power and subordination' (Gilroy ibid: 32-49) motivating this desire for a return to an idyllic past, he nonetheless denounces Afrocentrism as a 'poor basis for the writing of cultural history and the calculation of political choices' (ibid: 188). I suggest, however, that recourse to essentialism and fantasies of a glorious past must not be read entirely negatively or dismissively - they are



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symptoms and responses to a white racist hegemony which continues to be a menace to black humanity (Chrisman 1997, Lipsitz 1995). Following Jacqueline Rose's work in *States of Fantasy* (1996), Alasdair Pettinger suggests that the recent focus on the invention of traditions and imagined communities has created an environment where the psychic and unconscious forces that shape cultural constructions have not received the attention they deserve. He argues that the construction of elaborate fantasy in remembrance,

is testimony to the effects of the trauma of dispossession. It gives rise to absolutist yearnings for justice that take (often violent) forms that we cannot easily control. The attempt to come to terms with the inheritance of "racial terror" in more reasonable, non-nationalistic ways, are harder than is commonly supposed. (1998: 145)

What must be demonstrated is that diasporic cultures and identities are not produced or sustained by a direct and unchanging relation to a territory across time. However, the national culture of each diasporic African community cannot be ignored in favour of an abstract trans-nationalism as championed by Gilroy. Even when we travel beyond our national border or local context, we still carry the politics and the poetics of our local context into our various trans-national zones. According to Hortense Spillers our experience of the global is reflected and refracted through the national culture and the national moment (1998:7). In fact, it is through attention to the national context and our embeddedness within it that we can begin to assert ourselves on the international stage and can initiate a dialogue beyond the frontiers of our own national context. Lipsitz makes the point succinctly:

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Recourse to the strategic essentialism of black nationalism in the US has frequently enabled a people under siege to transform themselves from a despised cultural minority to part of a global majority, to render the terms and conditions of white supremacy in the US relative, provisional, and contingent rather than absolute. The generations of African Americans in slavery and in freedom who buried their dead facing Africa and who placed broken glass on their graves in the African manner reminded themselves of their history before captivity and slavery. They were not engaging in essentialism: on the contrary, their actions reminded them of the historical - and therefore changeable - nature of their bondage. (1995: 197)

In diasporic communities the building blocks of identity are always being renewed and recreated, according to the needs and demands of each new moment or cultural regimes and in the intersection between the national context and trans-national zones. The relationship to a territory is an index of the interplay between imagination and memory and the reconfiguration of practice as demanded by the situation. From here, diasporic cultures and identities acquire their meaning, and that meaning gets transformed and projected back into the world. For example, places - like Brick Lane in London or the Porte de Clignanourt in Paris - absolutely lose any unified meaning that might have been ascribed to them, through the infusion of migrant cultures. As the current site of the newly arrived Bangladeshi migrant community, Brick Lane continues its historical absorption or gathering of migrant communities: the site of an earlier settlement for



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Huguenots and European Jews. Their cultural practices and traces of texture and aroma are woven into the fabric of contemporary Brick lane: Bagel shops, textiles, bric-a-brac, street signs now written in foreign script. Here we see the sensuous and material interaction between body and place. As Casey writes, 'lived bodies serve both to animate and to connect places' (1993: 73) with the cultural habits of earlier communities. Diasporic bodies thus scatter, gather and transform the meaning and texture of places as they scatter and gather themselves across the planet. It is this dynamic of creating cultures in diverse locations that enables diasporic communities to construct a bridge back to "home". In many cases there is an acknowledgement that this bridge involves a *crossing*, an interval of different existential conditions. For instance, the recent Yoruba and Akan pirate radio station 'Empire Radio' in London reports and relays stories of unfolding dramas in Nigeria and Ghana respectively. It also offers directives and resources about conditions in the new home and ways of "mastering" and negotiating it: such as language-training, supplementary schools, jobs and training, business opportunities and moral guidance. Implicit within Empire Radio's output is a crossing or interval between conditions back home and conditions of diaspora. One presenter advises his listeners: 'We are a long way from home. Husband, support your wife with childcare. Wife, support your husband with putting bread on the table so that your stay here will be of harmony. We are a long way from home. We don't know the date of our return!' This was immediately followed by the Nigerian Juju musician Chief Ebenezer Obey singing: "Adversity makes man travel far away from home". Obey sums up how many members of the Yoruba and Akan diaspora understand their situation.

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Diaspora always evokes questions about the practices of remembrance, separation, anxiety, loss, freedom and new habits of being. A theological dimension (again grounded in the connection between diaspora and stories of the Pentateuch) is ever-present: that of eschatology and soteriological return. "Babylon" and the Promised Land are the repeated tropes of black diasporic discourse especially amongst Rastafarians (Smith et. al 1960, Chevannes 1994). Diasporas are also the sites for the unleashing of imaginative futural possibilities that are perhaps otherwise unimaginable in the ancestral home. The diasporic context can thus become the site for the re-articulation and reworking of the past and the possibilities for their transformation through the affirmation of a sensuous future lived in the present.

Diaspora therefore refers to the articulation of what both Clifford and Gilroy punningly calls "roots" and "routes". As such, in many instances the diasporic subject's relationship to her roots or origin is less about the primacy of dwelling (in the past or in a place), and more about distance, separation and the *geography* of the present (Blanchot 1969). For Blanchot the "truth" of diaspora, or what he terms the "exilic condition", is the affirmation of a 'residence that does not bind us to a place or to settling close to a relation forever and already founded' (ibid: 127). Diasporicity here then becomes akin to an ethics of existence, one that affirms the Yoruba adage that 'the world is our market, heaven is home'. In this maxim, home is a metaphysical issue. It is not of this world. Home, I was told by my "grand" aunt, is not where you are from, or where you are, but where you are going. It is an ethics of existence that accepts our inherent homelessness; the futility of searching for a "ground" to support identity on earth. Home is a dream



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deferred and encountered only in a dance towards the ancestors. While a metaphysical idea of home and our inherent homeless is useful for breaking down the distinction between the "native" and the "foreigner", it becomes problematic if this metaphysical assumption is not returned to the existential context which differentiates between forms of being at home and being homeless.

Here we have it, *diaspora is first of all about space, spacing, and distance, rather than time*. In fact the primacy of temporality and history, with their assumptions of fixity, residence and dwelling, are *dis-placed* (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993). When we think the diasporic experience first of all spatially, we are moved to consider the place and conditions of the present, the existential here and now present; the ways in which 'processes of inclusion and exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under a given circumstance' (Brah 1996: 192). Moreover, how these circumstances, embedded as they are in power relations, modify and modulate the diasporic experience. It is only *then* that we can begin to account for diasporic temporality and the fantasies, stories, and myths constructed in the new place. But, by this time, the possibility of continuing a *linear* trajectory is ruptured. Instead, the present opens up different avenues, different paths, different possibilities from which we navigate and assume an embodied presence: a 'garden of forking paths' (Borges 1964). The present thus becomes a complex open site of potential transformation or even an open wound that refuses to heal, because the space of the present continues to militate against calling a place home even when we are more at home in that place. As I noted above, Brah suggests that differential positioning within the spatio-existential field of the diaspora engenders different experiences of home. I

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may feel at home in my diasporic location (London), but for various reasons, a residue of non-belonging remains. Something is always telling me, that I don't belong here and I will never belong. The extent to which I feel comfortable among white people is the extent to which I feel comfortable among black English people. Therefore, I find myself calling to Lagos as "home". Once in Lagos, the feeling of home dissipates as soon as the family meetings are over: I never lose sight of its strangeness. As always, this yo-yo-ing between feeling at home and calling a place a home is tied in with current circumstances and habits of being - the spaces of the present. Of course, the dialectics of belonging and non-belonging have always to be determined and achieved with each unfolding context. Such a context could be related to the degree in which one can access different forms of *capital* or privilege as it is the case among different Asian groups in Britain mentioned above. These differences often determine the extent to which the diasporic subject will experience alienation, sense of freedom, entrapment, the pain of loss and displacement, and the nostalgic longing for an "elsewhere" (Clifford 1994).

Privileging the *space* and *place* of diaspora does not therefore imply a wholesale rejection of time and history and the difference of generations. Such an implication would be absurd. To focus on spatiality absolutely would entail merely another reiteration of post-modernist "nomadism", where all time (history, memory and difference) is reduced to space. As such, traces of the past would become neutral and we would become unable to account for the different historical, political, economic and symbolic situations out of which diasporas are formed and in which they are embedded. On the contrary traces of the past cannot be neutral because they *constitute* identity in



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part. These traces are the "ground" in which identities derive their meaning and are performed and transformed. Identity is the transformation of traces in the present. To put it another way, identity is the interplay between subjective experience and its embeddedness within changing cultural, economic and historical constellations. As Stuart Hall writes of diasporic black cultural identity,

Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (1990: 225)

Black identities then become, to use Leroy Jones's phrase, a "changing same". It involves *being* (the positing of the traces) and *becoming* (their transformation). From the point of view of diasporic experience, identity thought of as a changing *same* can lead to feelings of connection or relatedness to a collective past or community. On the other hand, this identity taken in terms of a *changing* same can lead to feelings of profound difference and distance from it. In this instance, cultural forms, collective identities and experiences are perpetually open to reinterpretation, renewal, re-memory, and re-invention. Such a perspective is able to accommodate other identities in its fold without berating or denying the different histories that have produced them.

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I will later in this thesis be arguing that the capacity of New World Africans to embrace the foreign and the strange has to do with African aesthetic and ethical sensibility with its emphasis on polymetric in music and polytheism in religion. In his important book *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, John Miller Chernoff writes, 'African affinity for polymetric musical forms indicates that, in the most fundamental sense, the African sensibility is profoundly pluralistic' (1979: 158). He goes further to say that Africans make music 'out of the fragmentation and discontinuity of events, [and] respect pluralism as a source of vitality, and to bring to any situation the social presence and poise which is the counterpart of the African religious faith' (ibid: 158). But I am moving too far ahead!

To make the project or processes of identity an open and inclusive one it is necessary to take into account generational differences. For example, children of first generation migrants might acknowledge a connection with parental identities while simultaneously embracing other identities that are forged in the encounters with others. In other words, there are important *generational* differences at work in the experience of diasporicity. The notion of "generation" can then, begin to be heard in its verbal sense: as the renewed constitution of relations between origins and the present. Identities are not voluntaristic, they are embedded in relations of power and domination that mark them as different, as not belonging. In contrast, if diaspora is privileged in terms of time and history, the question: "Am I a diasporic subject?" has a fixed implication. Diasporic subjectivity becomes connected to a history in such a manner that the space and the different experience of the present are undermined by time. But when diasporic experience is



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approached first of all from the perspective of place and generation, any notion of a direct connection to a past is already fractured, deferred or broken by the demands of the present. Thus, diaspora, is *always* an interplay between geography and history and the difference of generations. The unfolding of diasporicity is always articulated within a spatio-temporal matrix that is less about a shared originary territory and more about the practice of embodied re-memoration and its transfiguration in the present.

The space and place of the present mediates experience and the kinds of stories or histories we are able to construct. That is, the context of the present shapes the kind of question we can ask about the past. This context necessarily requires *embodiment*. Embodiment is the ground of lived experience. Put another way, embodiment refers to the way we “inhabit” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 139) our body through the performance of specific bodily acts in a given location and in time. As Dalibor Vesley writes ‘inhabiting is a situational condition involving memories, dreams and imaginations’ (1988: 61). For Gail Weiss, ‘embodiment suggests an experience that is constantly in the making, that is continually being constituted and reconstituted from one moment to the next’ (1999: 43). Embodied existence therefore affects, alters and limits the kind of experience we can have and the kind of origin story we tell the world and ourselves. To insert the notion of incarnated subjectivity into diaspora studies and therefore attain a more concrete level of analysis, I will now provide a basic account of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s early philosophy of the body. In order to do so, I will have to leave aside many important aspects of his phenomenology. Nevertheless, in providing a bare-bones phenomenological account of embodiment, I will have developed the resources to think

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the relation between the body, space and time. Therefore, I will be able to show how phenomenology allows us to begin to think diasporicity as an embodied situation.

### **The Body in Merleau-Ponty**

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is in part an attempt to counter the philosophical tradition that privileges the role of the disembodied mind or consciousness in human existence and the production of meaning. The strategy he employs is to stress the active embodied relations between human consciousness, thought, knowledge and the world, thereby refuting the Cartesian thinking subject. 'Consciousness', Merleau-Ponty writes, is not only embodied, it 'is in the first place not a matter of "I think that" but of "I can"' (1962: 137). This incarnated intentionality refers to the body's capacities to act in the world at a stage prior to conscious or reflective thinking. Self-knowledge and perception are derived first of all from an awareness of bodily capacities according to the demands of a situation. For example, through practising the headstand *asana* (position) in yoga, I know my own strength, power and discover weaknesses and limitations in parts of my body. I know this because my body is my most intimate possession and that with which I am most familiar (1962: 107). This awareness of my bodily capacities, according to Merleau-Ponty, is acquired through habits formed in practice. These capacities are, of course, limited by physiological constraints, previous attitudes and movements and my world-historical and cultural positioning. All these factors together with my communications with others condition the way I comport myself and inhabit the world around me.



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The intentional "I-can" means that in my relation to the world my body has acquired (through learning, mimesis and transformative repetition) certain patterns of comportment and engaging with the world. This intentionality takes place on the basis of what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'corporeal schema' (1962: 142). The corporeal schema refers to the set of functions the body has acquired in order to perform actions in the world. The schema involves a relationship between the self and the world; it is the necessary condition for the body's situatedness and grounding within a world. In a sense, the motivated, schematising body is what brings the world into existence and is the prelude to action. On the other hand, the world gives the body a sense of its horizon, its spatial positioning, and corporeal possibilities. According to Kirsten Hastrup 'The person as bodily presence is the locus - and the pre-text - of action' (1995: 89). My acting in the world then is always *directed* and *situational*, the potentiality for a world. As Merleau-Ponty writes in a paper entitled "An Unpublished Text",

A "corporeal or postural schema" gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or "motor projects," radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. (1964: 5)

So, for Merleau-Ponty intentionality is irreducibly embodied, and each specific intentional act is bound up with a set of pre-dispositions which make up an intentional character. That is, as embodied subjects our actions are constituted, limited and

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empowered by an interaction between our habitat, history and other cultural and biological inheritances. It is within this "already constituted" space, to use Merleau-Ponty's term, that we take up our place in the world, interact with others and make ourselves feel at home or made not to feel at home. The intentional body is therefore always constituted spatially ('a link between a here and a yonder') and temporally ('a now and a future') (1962: 140). This is what it means to inhabit the body. In another lexicon, the body acquires habit through a vital relation to the *habitus* that gives it pointers and suggestions in a world-place that precedes the agent. The capacity to act in the world<sup>3</sup> involves perception and "motility". Action and experience in the world are grounded in forms of habit that are repeated and re-established with each bodily involvement. Habits are therefore, 'not long established custom' (ibid: 146). This acting and repetition of habit, the essence of motility, is always grounded within the corporeal practices of a culture. Later on in this thesis, I refer to this form of bodily grounding as "rhythmic gestural patterning". Motility refers to the body's capacity to move confidently in a certain way across time and in space.

At this point, two objections may be raised regarding Merleau-Ponty's intentional motility. First, Merleau-Ponty's worldly incarnation might be accused of excluding the experience of those who are inactive or immobile. His response would be that insofar as such agents are involved in situations with others and exist in a familiar place, they are capable of intentions and actions (1962: 165). 'Movement', Merleau-Ponty reminds us,

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<sup>3</sup> The world for Merleau-Ponty refers to an horizon which can never be completely articulated or achieved, just as a 'real' horizon can never be reached. As an open system, the world is perpetually unfolding into new possibilities. It is in this sense infinite. The relation between the body/place, *habitus* is horizontal. They unfold each other, into each other.



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should not be understood simply as 'object movement and transference in space, but as a project towards movement or "potential movement" [...] a form of conduct (ibid: 234). Thus, the condition for worldly existence resides in the potentiality of movement as action, as a necessary ecstatic intentionality which might help bring about change within our social life-world. The second objection which has more force, suggests that in providing an account of a common embodied experience, Merleau-Ponty can be accused of neglecting the ways in which bodies exist in relationships to power. Or, as Viven Sobchack notes in her book *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Merleau-Ponty neglects to consider 'bodily existence as it is culturally and historically lived in certain forms of critical differentiation and discrimination (1992: 148). His account of the body is therefore applicable to "everybody" and "anybody". In the essay 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality', Iris Marion Young (1989) argued that the body's movement is always circumscribed and given significance within the field of power in which it is moving, a point which is at best under-emphasised in Merleau-Ponty's work. This context means that the (white) female subject can experience her body in contradictory ways or as an "inhibited intentionality". In a world where sexual difference and indeed racial, class, age and ability are interwoven, the Merleau-Pontyan confident 'I can', can become translated into a restrictive, unconfident "I cannot"<sup>4</sup>.

We are already gesturing towards an embodied conception of the body's relation to movement, diaspora and its world. Embodied agents are grounded in their lived

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<sup>4</sup> In another important essay in the book *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (1990a) Young also argues that Merleau-Ponty cannot deal with the female/mother

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experience precisely because they “inhabit” their body and are forced to inhabit their body in a manner that is inscribed and circumscribed, social and self generated. The body referred to here is not the body seen as an "object", it is 'not a collection of adjacent organs', nor is it a thing that exists in the here and now in a discrete spatio-temporal slot. Rather, the phenomenological body is 'the congealed face of existence' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 234), that 'gives significance [...] to cultural objects like words' (ibid: 235), 'the potentiality of a certain world' (ibid: 106), 'the systems of anonymous "functions" which draw every particular focus into a general project' (ibid: 354). Like diasporicity, the body, is an expressive movement from this space to another space, from this time to another time. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

[...] the body is essentially an expressive space [...]. But our body is not merely one expressive space among the rest, for that is simply the constituted body. It is the origin of the rest, expressive movement itself, that which causes them to begin to exist as things, under our hands and eyes [...]. The body is our general medium for having a world. (1962: 146)

As the ground of experience, the body is accorded a primordial *ontological* status in Merleau-Ponty. It is neither the subject nor object of experience. *It is prior to both*. It is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the "third term" or "third space" or the "third genus of being" (See 1962: 104, 244, 248, 254, 350). The body lies between and yet prior to the

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experience of pregnancy. See Geil Weiss (1999) for a critique of Young's position.



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two dichotomous poles. 'I apprehend my body as subject-object' (ibid: 95). Under Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology, subject and object fold into each other through lived experience. The body therefore acts as the ground of being a subject and being positioned as an object, of my having relations with others and as that which brings existence into being. Unlike Descartes' cogito, for Merleau-Ponty we are not primarily rational subjects who ground ourselves in a transparent act of consciousness. Conversely, we are not purely physical beings. Rather, our subjectivity, as beings capable of mental acts and dispositions towards the world, and our objectivity as physical entities, is only understandable on account of our embodiment.

This phenomenology of the body has significant epistemological implications. Since Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment is grounded in ontology, it precedes any epistemic claims of the subject or the object. The body, in this ontologically primordial sense is not that which can be known (say in the discourses of biology), or that which knows, rather it is that which *allows* us to know. As the sociologist Ian Burkitt writes, 'All knowledge is embodied and situated, created within that fundamental unity between subjects and objects which is the product of having an active body' (1999: 74). Merleau-Ponty's body refuses to be placed within an epistemology that can never overcome the dualism it must presuppose in order to install itself. This dualism continues up until the work of post-structuralist feminists such as Judith Butler. Her failure lies in refusing to rework ontology, therefore reducing all forms of embodied experience into forms of discourse and the effect of power. The body in Merleau-Ponty's sense must always exceed this reduction. As he writes,

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In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points nor are they a limitless number of relations synthesized by my consciousness, and into which it draws my body. I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them. (1962: 140)

The expressive, situated body, like the world, is a process that continuously unfolds and reveals itself anew in relation to other bodies, new situations, new roles. This means that the body in motion and the knowledge it bears is always shifting and indeterminate. As indeterminate corporeal beings, we grasp situational shifts and are affected by them as we interact with our social life-worlds. Movements in the world affect our state of being and the way we commune with the world. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment can therefore be seen as the overture to a situated theory of emotions. In this sense it is possible to say that all motion is at the same time *e*-motion; positions and dis-positions have affective force. Indeed, this is precisely the claim posited by Sue Cataldi in her excellent book *Emotion, Depth and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space* (1993). She writes that 'Emotional experiences involve perceptions of meaningful change "in" a situation and "in" ourselves in relation to that situation' (ibid: 91). Motility always involves emotional shifts and the generation of 'another emotional stance "position"' (ibid:91). This 'is intrinsically dynamic [and] apprehended kinaesthetically though [the] living body' (ibid: 117). Conversely, emotional experience always needs motility, or a background of some prior sense of orientation or dis-orientation. For example, people



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moving their arms whilst talking on the telephone, going to a 3-D cinema where people hold out their arms in response to what they are watching, or, in general terms, the use of spatial vocabulary in the expression of emotions. Another example of spatial emotionality is captured in the phrase 'I need to get away from x' as both a physical and emotional description. Thus, any form of displacement from the locus of significance can lead to a shift in mood. Following Merleau-Ponty, we can say that emotion is another name for being-in-the-world and 'being-to-the-world' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: viii). Cataldi's account refuses to reduce emotionality to a psychologistic frame; the emotions reveal the dynamic of relations between self/other and world rather than being merely aspects of the individual psyche. Far from being merely episodic events at work within an unchanging psychological structure, different emotional responses express changing relations to a changed world. Rather than emotions being "objects" of our experience, they are the *forms* of our experience and the fundamental way in which we orient ourselves within it. Cataldi's development of Merleau-Ponty's thought demonstrates that *the (e)motional body in its socio-cultural instantiation and interrelationality is that which grounds experience and ethics.*

What I am suggesting here is that - ontologically and phenomenologically - diasporicity is *not* only an experience of movement, but often induces profound emotional responses: danger and fear, loss and grief, joy and pain. Again, the emotional responses at work within the experience of diasporicity are not merely 'a cognitive interpretation of the situation, nor of some inner physiological stirrings, rather it is *a bodily expression within a situation* that gives us joy [or pain]' (Ian Burkitt 1999: 117 authors emphasis). In other

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words, emotional responses demonstrate the deep-level effects that shifts in place or interactions with others have upon our being-in-the-world. In this sense, the embodied emotions of diasporicity should be taken more seriously than they have been. Certainly they should be taken at least as seriously as theoretical or discursive treatments of diaspora.

The primacy of embodiment which draws into focus 'a deeper awareness of the sociality of being and emotion' (Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 62) within the black diaspora, will be an ongoing part of this work. A focus in this direction brings with it an explanatory power that has been missing from the work on the black diaspora that has appeared recently. For example, the tensions between the so-called essentialist accounts of the black diaspora, and the anti-essentialists and anti-anti-essentialists, can be resolved by a return to an embodied account of the emotions. This return helps to position these different theorisations of diasporicity in terms of divergent affectively-produced responses to being dislocated from a familiar setting and conditions of oppression. Theory itself, while not being wholly produced by the emotions, is not entirely divorced from them: our thinking is itself part of an affective drive.

It is with this background of the expressive, *emotional* body that we can begin to understand the relation between conditions of embodiment and *freedom*. The body in Merleau-Ponty's sense is, as we have seen, not the actual physical or biologically-fixed body. Rather, embodiment refers to the fundamental synthesising agency that brings the world into existence. The body becomes a gathering of the past in the present that



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enables the emergence of different possibilities, to create new beginnings and new futures. But this is only the active side of a two-sided story. The body's capacity to bring the world into being is based on its passive relation to a pre-existing world. This might at first sound paradoxical. It appears that the body is both the origin and not the origin of the world's existence. The world at one and the same time appears to originate with *and yet precede* embodiment. However, the contradiction disappears when the relation between my body and the world is seen to be one of *mutual interdependency* that is non-oppositional. Embodiment allows a world that is always already pre-existent to come into being. The body therefore *renews* the world through a sort of "eternal return". The body takes up the possibilities offered by the world and repeats and transforms them. Merleau-Ponty writes, 'The synthesis of both time and space is a task that always has to be performed afresh' (1962: 140). The body-world relation then is one of incorporation, improvisation and innovation. In short, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology reveals the moment of freedom to be thoroughly corporeal.

This co-conditionality of the body and world is an important insight in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that has far reaching implications for thinking origin, displacement and subjectivity. For Merleau-Ponty, whenever the body takes up the world it necessarily transforms it. To begin, the body's emplacement in a world means that the world exists as 'always "already constituted", and we shall never come to understand it by withdrawing into a worldless perception' (1962: 252). That is, the world we are located in has already been marked out by others; it is already imbued with values, traces and significance that precede our occupation. To illustrate this point Merleau-Ponty made

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use of tropes of birth and death. Subjectively speaking, I cannot say that I experience the occasion of my birth because it is a pre-personal event that made my existence possible. Nor can I be present at the event of my death, for it is after the fact of my existence:

I can, [...] apprehend myself only as "already born" and "still alive" - I can apprehend my birth and death only as prepersonal horizons: I know that people are born and die, but I cannot know my own birth and death'.  
(ibid: 216)

The world therefore has a sort of intentionality that is prior to our own subjective intentions or free will. And yet, the world only has significance when its sedimented values are taken up afresh in practice by each embodied community or subject: 'We have the experience of an *I* not in the sense of an absolute subjectivity, but indivisibly demolished and remade by the course of time' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 219). For instance, although the judicial power of white supremacy has been abolished, many white people still benefit and unwittingly perpetuate it. According to Charles W. Mills, the founding narratives of white supremacy are still 'maintained through inherited patterns of discrimination, exclusionary racial bonding, cultural stereotyping, and differential white power deriving from consolidated economic privilege' (1998: 102). In this instance, if freedom is the capacity to act and realise my intentionality, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, I, as an individual, have the choice and power *to* either persist with an oppressive practice or help to change that practice. Freedom to reject oppressive practices as well as



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contribute to its perpetuation is, however, grounded in socio-historical process which acts as the bases for the formulation of our choices. Merleau-Ponty writes,

The fact remains that I am free, not in spite of, or on the hither side of, those motivations, but by means of them. For this significant life, this certain significance of nature and history which I am, does not limit my access to the world, but on the contrary is my means of entering into communication with it. (1962:455)

Anti-racist struggles, affirmative action policies and alternative cultural practices are attempts to question and demolish hegemonic power structures (Alcoff 1999). The living body is the site for this demolition and reassertion of a world or structural power that is always experienced anew across and within different groups. These "prepersonal horizons" are what constitute tradition, values and mythos. They are the opening, or an invitation to work within existing frame as the frame is carried along (consciously and unconsciously) and transformed. Thus, Merleau-Ponty describes the capacity of the body and world to assimilate and (sometimes) transform each other as a 'communication with the world more ancient than thought' (1962: 254). It is worth citing the passage, to which this phrase belongs in full,

My personal existence must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition.

There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body, not that momentary body which is the

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instrument of my personal choices and which fastens upon this or that world, but the system of anonymous 'functions' which draw every particular focus into a general project. Nor does this blind adherence to the world, this prejudice in favour of being, occur only at the beginning of my life. It endows every subsequent perception of space with its meaning, and it is resumed at every instant. Space and perception generally represent, at the core of the subject, the fact of his birth, the perpetual contribution of his bodily being, a communication with the world more ancient than thought. (ibid: 254)

Although it may sound odd and initially contrary to common sense, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology shows that the world's origin is constituted and re-constituted through each event of embodied agency. In effect, the world is always gathered through a dynamic of differential repetition. The notion of "origin" is therefore *relativised* - we have no absolute origin or "home". The movement that is injected into the world through each somatic dance is therefore the source of a fundamental "homelessness" at work. In the Yoruba proverb mentioned above 'the world is a market, heaven is home', we see this sentiment expressed in pithy form.

Merleau-Ponty's account shows that consciousness, emotion, representation, knowledge, and thought in general are secondary to an embodied communication with the world. It is as intentional, situated, and inter-corporeal beings that we have a world and are *free* to act. And it is through this "worlding" of our embodied communication that we take up



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sets of stylistic gestures, features and habits that are specific to our cultural, geographical, economical and historical situation. Moreover, this communication does not happen once and for all. Although it is the origin of bodily being and the world, the communication is always renewed upon each encounter. Here then, Merleau-Ponty offers a radically different way of thinking both origin and freedom. Paradoxically, origin is always repeating itself, through difference. That is, "origin" itself is already always constituted *by* difference. The origin is fated, perpetually to become a stranger to itself.

Freedom, for Merleau-Ponty is not a return to an *I*, rather, freedom, is the 'lived body's ability to structure its world and to realise the potentialities informed by its social history' (Diprose 1994: 107). Freedom and origin are thus given in the active interaction between embodied subjects, their situatedness and interactions with others. The origin is incessantly forgotten through the active work of its creation. The force of Merleau-Ponty's account works precisely because he demonstrates that ontology is constituted by difference; and by implication social identities. It is from the primordially accorded to difference that as embodied subjects we give birth to the world and new possibilities are opened up. What is most significant in this thought is the way in which it opens up a way of thinking free actions in bodily and intersubjective terms. For Merleau-Ponty, freedom is generated using tropes of the *féminin* - that of pregnancy and nativity. The birth of the body-world relation does not happen merely once in time, rather it is continually renewing itself. The body and the world are therefore co-originary, in the sense that the former repeats the values and directives of the latter through a transformative reiteration. The birth of the subject in a space-time frame then, is always already a *re-birth*.

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### Incarnated Diaspora

Although Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has many implications for an embodied reflection upon the diasporic experience, here I want to focus on two. First, it can be used to show that the experience of diaspora is grounded in embodiment. Because for Merleau-Ponty, the body and the world are closely interwoven and because the body acts as origin to a world that already precedes it, the body therefore is always already situated in *place*. At the end of his career, in his posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) this insight is taken to its logical conclusion. He argues in effect that there is no absolute distinction between the two. The body is a place, a repository for a certain view of the world, for ways of moving, for ways of recognising and interacting with others, and so on. In its turn, a place is a form of the body: a unifying site of historical and cultural forces. We can never say that a body is not a place or a place is not a body. Merleau-Ponty calls this intertwining relation the "flesh of the world".<sup>5</sup>

We can now see how diaspora emerge within a phenomenological perspective. If possessing a body entails being possessed by a world or being-in-place, being *displaced* or being *out-of-place* has serious experiential consequences for diasporic subjects. Because one is no longer *in* a geographical setting that is familiar, one can no longer have the deep habitual connection to the world. Severed from her cultural horizon and "motive will" (Spillers 1987), the diasporic black subject can therefore experience the pain of

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<sup>5</sup> The French feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray (1984) also makes similar point in her essay 'Place Interval'. She extends the place-body relation to women's double emplacement. For Irigaray, women do not only exist in a place, but are also a place - a container. Although twice emplaced, in social and political discourses women are deprived of a proper place.



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displacement acutely. This pain, according to Casey, goes beyond an emotional response; it is physical because one no longer has a certain habitual connections to the world even when emplaced. Casey writes, 'Entire cultures can become profoundly averse to the places they inhabit, feeling atopic and displaced within their own emplacement' (1993: 34). Referring to the plight of the Dineh Indians in northeastern Arizona, forced to relocate to a reservation camp, Casey argues that there has been an increased incidence of suicide, alcoholism, depression and disorientation (ibid: 35). This is because for the Dinehs (or Navajo) their land supports and gives coherence and continuity to identity. I am therefore suggesting that, to the extent that we move geographically, from our locus of origin is the extent to which we are all diasporic. The issue in theorising diaspora in this way will involve how the distinction between a metaphysical form of diasporicity and the collective historical mode of diasporicity is resolved.

Painful or pleasurable, if the grounding of diasporic experience in the emotionally situated body remains unthought, a dangerous alignment presents itself where the historically constituted diasporic subject is compared to the world traveller mentioned above. In this situation, the diasporic subject is associated with the elite of nation states: entrepreneurial, intellectual jet setters who are able to celebrate the commodity fetishism of their global access and privilege. Such consummate consumers express a violent and vulgar display of their ability to cross borders with ease and consume difference without regard for those they encounter and without significant emotional impact on their lives, let alone emotional destabilisation. Because of these cultural and border crossings by the

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metropolitan elite, historically constituted diasporic communities may uncritically cling ever more to the allure of cultural and racial purity. As bell hooks writes,

The unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African-Americans is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience. (1991: 29)

As such, a diasporic idyll is constructed which celebrates the trans-national and hybrid. Once this discursive framework is internalised by those who have been genuinely displaced, their own diasporicity is rendered unproblematic. There is seen to be a joy and intrigue of diasporicity that is available for appropriation. The subject is neither absolutely without home, deterritorialised, nor boxed into a certain form of identity, and a form of freedom is apparently established.

Again, it is necessary to stress the significance of emotion upon the experience of diasporicity. What such an alignment fails to show is that for those whose entry into the New World has been one of violent negation of the freedom of the corporeal schema, hybrid, mongrel, and all those wonderful international beige figurations are in fact rife with conflict and unspeakable agony. These conflicts involve positionings, crises of identity, alienation, of being always out of time, off key. All these crises are crises of embodiment; crises of being a bodily being in the world where one set of codes or corporeal schemata lies in direct conflict to others; of being in two places at once or,



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better, of hopping between various languages and not finding solace in any. In this manner, diasporic subjects come to realise that their place in the world is a 'house of difference rather than the security of any particular difference' (Audre Lorde 1982: 226).

The "house of difference" equates with the Duboisian "double consciousness", where one is, in Gilroy's words 'striving to be both European and black' (1993: 1). Despite the recognition that the self is a "house of difference", many of us still yearn for a stable, coherent ground to support the self. In its absence, there is created the dilemma of being continually jostled by feelings of alienation from the body - being estranged by race, gender, generation, language and geography. A crisis whereby suicide, self-harm is a willing friend of the mind. This conflict can be so devastating that it renders itself incapable of expression and the body is enlisted for expression. In this case, diasporic agents can remain forever lost in translation, cut adrift in the interstitial, prey to the negative theology of the gods of the gaps. I am suggesting that the dis-placed diasporic body can be, and is often, a site of conflict and despair and not this wonderful consumerised, global mish-mash of difference and transgressive hybridity that is so celebrated in contemporary theory.

Diasporicity, as Hall defines it, is 'not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity' (1990: 235). Diasporicity is finally, according to Hall, a positionality. Hall is indeed right to say this. But what he fails to say is that it is a positionality that is always plagued by crisis, anxiety, restlessness, fear, and despair. This, statement, however, will be one-sided if we fail to acknowledge that in every

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condition of displacement, replacement is always at hand. The dynamics between displacement and replacement can and often do generate a positive, redemptive transformative self-representation where diasporic agents resist cultural and psychic annihilation by turning to positive elements within their own culture. This I will be discussing in chapters three and four.

The second implication of Merleau-Ponty's account is that through thinking the deep significance of the body-place relation, he offers a radical way of thinking about origin. His model of origin refutes a naïve "efficient" causality of embodied *habitus* (a tacit sedimentation of cultural practices and dispositions) as that which happens once and only once. In the naïve model, the embodied subject would be seen to acquire competence from a repetition of bodily acts grounded in an invariant culture. Within this model, any account of cultural change would involve what we might call purely external factors, the tradition of tradition. In contrast, the origin for Merleau-Ponty is a momentary event that is always renewed and reconstituted in the embodied moment of the present. As was shown above, although the world is always already constituted, it has no value or significance of itself until it is incorporated into the body of the present. It is at this point that the "subject" of tradition may become "agent" of change, both personally and in terms of the tradition itself. We can see that this process of incorporation always involves transformation, reworking, and mutation. Placement, displacement and replacement are always implicated in the transformation of origin. In other words, movement away from an original locus means that the origin itself is always being reconstituted according to its new context. In terms of thinking diasporicity, Merleau-



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Ponty's insight is that rather than seeing diasporicity as a result merely of changes in location and culture, it is instead the outcome of transformatory dialogues *between* the embodied subject, time and displacement. Thus, Merleau-Ponty allows us to think diasporicity as always already *ontological* and therefore a *general* condition of bodily being, rather than being simply an empirical-historical fact. Ontologising diaspora implicates difference within embodiment. Just as we tell changing stories of our childhood as we age, the agent's relation to home and origin is always one fractured and structured by a diasporicity of sorts. Home opens itself up to be reworked in the present. Through this disruption of linearity, home and subjectivity get imbued with new traces. The embodied situation, thought from the space of the present suggests a new way of thinking origin: an origin that oscillates between being-at-home and being-not-at-home, and a non-linear temporal form to being-in-the world.

As such, Merleau-Ponty's thought offers something like an *ethics* of diasporicity. Instead of the diasporic situation being understood as static and unresolved, his thought enables an account of an active agency that *takes up* the pre-constituted diasporic complex through the work of the present. The diasporic situation is therefore, through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological lens, no longer fixed or unchangeable; subjection turns into agency. Separate from the issue of being overlooked and unrecognised in theory, we can see that paradigms of pain are not a *necessary* condition of diasporicity. That is, because origin itself is a differential repetition, it means that the negative emotionality associated with displacement is open to the play of differences. It is in such an instance that we can begin to talk about the humour, the creativity and the joy of diasporicity. As Blanchot

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has noted of the Jewish diaspora, while it is important to emphasise the exilic conditions of the Jews, it is also necessary to highlight the positive and productive history of these diasporic communities.

One such form of situatedness that can be activated lies in the body's relation to a particular tradition. For example a black British female dancing body has a complex relationship to a given tradition of dance. Rather than merely taking up that form of dancing and repeating it, it is possible to see that the dance itself is already complexly imbued with traces of other times and other places, 'more ancient than thought'. Merleau-Ponty's thought therefore injects transformativity into the given as I have argued. Each new time of dancing involves a communication with the history or tradition of that dance and at the same time gives rise to the potential in that act to reconstitute and re-energise that tradition. The tradition itself encourages absorption from other sources for its continuity. However, at this point in the text I would like to note a difference that has opened up between Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'a communication more ancient than thought' and my own model of embodied diasporic agency. If we took what Merleau-Ponty writes uncritically, it would seem that each time *any* black female dancer dances, then the tradition in which she places herself is necessarily transformed. From my point of view, this model is too strong. I suggest that each act of dancing in the present has only the *potential* to transform the tradition. Ritual is required, a framework or *practice* to stop embodied agency's transformation being only accidental. The origin of any particular dance form is never an origin in the sense of something that just began at a certain time and maybe repeated in future. This is because the dance's origin is itself



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always being transformed through its performance. As Ralph Ellison suggests, a jazz musician achieves creativity and innovation by being thoroughly immersed and versed in the musical tradition of jazz. Within the frame of the tradition, the artist is able to assert and insert his or her own vision. In this way the tradition is continually energised and transformed:

I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within his frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. Life could be harsh, loud and wrong if it wished, but they lived it fully, and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form.  
(1955: 189)

To talk about tradition or origin does not therefore mark a return to a static or an unchanging time in the past. Tradition need not be traditional. Rather, origin and tradition become the *motile source* that is always taken up within each performative moment of the body's condensation or secretion of the past and present in the refashioning of the future. As Merleau-Ponty aptly writes:

In every focusing movement my body unites present, past and future, it secretes time, or rather it becomes that location in nature where, for the

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first time, events instead of pushing each other into the realm of being, project round the present a double horizon of past and future and acquire a historical orientation. My body takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present; it is not a thing, but creates time instead of submitting to it. But every act of focusing must be renewed, otherwise it falls into consciousness. (1962: 240)

Merleau-Ponty therefore enables us to think about an embodied diaspora that is at the very heart of what it is to be human. There is however a serious problem with this position. We can only accept whole-heartedly a generalised and metaphysically positioned diaspora if we disregard the question of how we are *positioned by*, and take a *position* in relation to others (Diprose 1994:18). Being positioned and taking up position means that we have to enquire about the status of different forms of embodiment; about diasporas of ontological space-time differentiation versus historically constituted diasporas. Although Merleau-Ponty's theory provides an account of the important role others play in the constitution and reconstitution of the development of the corporeal schema, he does not provide an analysis of variations within the social field. And it is thus that factors of gender, race, class, generation, location and language insert themselves within the warp and woof of diasporicity.

Merleau-Ponty's ethics of active transformation of cultural-historical origins comes up against its limits most succinctly when we ask the question: 'Can you be a diasporic subject and not know it?' The French philosopher would have to answer in the



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affirmative. Within his model it is possible to be unmindful of one's diasporicity due to the absence of conscious dialogue about how one's origins are being reworked through embodiment. That is, retention does not necessarily reveal itself as such, even as it operates within every gesture, speech pattern or movement. The force of Merleau-Ponty's work is its opening up of the pre-thetic dynamics of embedded and embodied agency, and tacit knowledge not the divergences orchestrated upon the subject's consciousness by the world. For example, if one is brought up in a world that has certain sets of vocabularies, norms, discourses, one does not necessarily have a critical relationship to the surrounding discourses. For instance, at least until recently, the heterosexual, white, male living in cultures which take whiteness and maleness as normalcy, rarely questions his manner of being-in-the-world and is continuously legitimatised by the socio-economic order. Consciousness of his mode of being-in-the-world only comes when it is challenged in intersubjective relationships (such as when he moves into another social culture where whiteness is not normative) and even then it is doubtful that the challenge will cause any profound emotional upheaval of the type so characteristic of the diasporic subject.

The very question that Merleau-Ponty suggests we answer with an affirmative "Yes" proves more complicated when 'we recognise the continuing and continuous operation of "fixing" performed by the categories of race and ethnicity, as well as class, gender, geography and so on in the formation of identity' (Ang 1994). The power of being positioned permits us to understand that the construction of subjectivity is not solely the work of the embodied subject itself. Although the body is both "subject" and "object" for

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Merleau-Ponty, he does not explicitly acknowledge *the other's* work of objectification in social relations. Again, Merleau-Ponty avoids an account of objectification imposed from the outside by stressing the bodily capacities of agents as a powerful medium. However, what is required to complete such an account is the recognition that as a positioned subject, there is always a moment when the self is constructed through the externalising power of the other and that ontology is first of all social. In such a moment one can only experience the self through the gaze of the other; the body is *no longer* both subject and object in Merleau-Ponty's sense. Rather, the body tends, through visual and perceptual sphere, to become objectified or named. The body as subject no longer exists for itself, but does so as object to others. Here, we are reminded of the unbridgeable difference between the *for-itself* and the *in-itself* in the existential philosophy of the other French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. For Sartre, the gaze of the other attempts to fix the subject in its being, as if the subject were an object. That is, it is only when I take account of how I appear to others that I experience my body as other to me. Fraleigh, suggests that 'Alienation, the sense of separation from others, seems located precisely in this experience' (1987: 17). In this model, the subject can either accede to the objectifying gaze of the other or attempt to refuse it or not even notice its presence. Is it possible to reject the Sartrean bifurcating move of seeing subjectivity and positioning as opposed, such that one is either a subject or objectified?

I suggest that in any full account of subjectivity, the dialectics between auto-constructions of subjectivity and those imposed from outside would have to be *negotiated*, rather than set up as opposed. While how I appear to others might be limiting



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and conditions my habits of being in the world, my whole corporeal trajectory need not be determined by these external limitations or the limitations wrought by my body. Through my power of choice and action I can create myself. As Thomas Slaughter reminds us in his discussion of black agency:

Certainly racism wounds - it can often mutilate individual self-respect, but this is not the same thing as saying that it conditions an entire community's perception of itself. Moreover, what is left out of this image is the group's actual history. This history is not one in which passivity was the name of the game. (1983: 106)

To adapt a phrase from Shakespeare, some are born with diasporicity, some achieve diasporicity, and some have diasporicity thrust upon them. For all Merleau-Ponty's uses in providing something like an ethics of diasporic redemptive transformative agency, the limits of his work as it stands are that it can only account for the first of these three possibilities. By refusing to analyse the differences at work in the social field, Merleau-Ponty's thought risks concealing the power relations that constitute it, setting his work adrift as an abstract ontology rather than a concrete engagement. In terms of applying his thought to the theorisation of diasporic experience, the "dangerous alignment" mentioned above looms large, as a generalised *existential* diasporicity threatens to swamp empirical-historical forces of fixity.

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### Historicising the Corporeal Schema

In this light, it is pertinent to look at the work of Frantz Fanon in order to show how the other two possibilities - diasporicity as an achievement and as an imposition - can be embraced within a phenomenological framework. In the chapter, 'The Lived Experience of the Black'<sup>6</sup> in his book *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967), Fanon confronts Merleau-Ponty in terms of the criticism developed above concerning the absence of positioning and inattention to other-directed limitations upon experience in his phenomenology of embodiment. Fanon begins this chapter by agreeing with Merleau-Ponty that there is a fundamental *ambiguity* in how the subject is constructed. Like Merleau-Ponty, the corporeal schema is described by Fanon as 'a definitive structuring of self and the world [...] because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world' (1967: 111). However, for Fanon, this pre-discursive play between agent and horizon is threatened or mediated by a third term - white racial norms and their discursive representational regimes. In the racialised encounter, the agency of the African body is challenged, negated and reduced to a phobogenetic object, whose selfhood is represented through what the colour black signifies. In this representation, the African agent is stripped of all social and cultural practices, and he<sup>7</sup> comes to embody the white "myth of the negro", a myth that reduces black people to "savages, brutes, illiterates" (ibid: 117). Despite Fanon's effort to assert black humanity, this myth continues to determine and structure black and white relations. The black subject comes to experience his body in solely

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<sup>6</sup> Although my discussion of this chapter in Fanon's book make use of Charles Lam Markmann (1986) translation, I have not followed his English translation of the title 'The Fact of Blackness' Charles

<sup>7</sup> In Fanon, the black diasporic experience is constituted around of the experience of the black male. Fanon sees the association of blackness with corporeality as signified in the figure of the monstrous black penis.



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negative terms and the freedom of agency presumed in Merleau-Ponty's corporeal schema becomes a luxury afforded only to imperial white males. In this way, Fanon sketched out what he terms *historico-racial schema*. This schema, he argues, precedes the corporeal schema and its elements are not provided for him by "residual sensations and perceptions primarily of a tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic and visual character", but by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories' (Fanon 1967: 111)). The emphasis on the epidermal by the European white other, Fanon argues, provides the "racial parameters" for black people's action and engagement with the world.

In opposition to this denial of his corporeal schema, Fanon attempts to assert black humanity by showing that the black male also has limbs just like other human beings. This attempt too, was rejected and reduced to a frozen caricature. Such an objectification, Fanon tells us, 'fixed [him] there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye' (ibid: 109). At this point, the corporeal schema dissolves and is superseded by the *racial epidermal schema*. This refers to the inscription of race on the skin wherein the black skin is a signifier of cultural difference. The power and violence of "epidermalization" functions as an implicit refusal of the potentiality of the embodied subject to transform her historically given world. The white other fixes the black subject as having a specific origin which he or she must relate or return. An origin that has been constructed by the white other as 'tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships' (ibid:112). Such representation denies the *freedom* of the black subject. The subject is alienated from the possibility of

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participating within historicity - the process of historical change - and therefore of being able to transform the present. The black subject can no longer re-create her origins by forgetting them; because the stories and details have the weight of white institutional powers and its representational machinery. For these reasons Fanon argues that the historico-racial schema precedes both the epidermal and corporeal schema.

Early on in the text Fanon describes his own experience of being looked at by a white child with his mother on a train, an experience that objectifies and forces an awareness of his skin, diasporicity and finally origin: "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" A child's utterance reduced him to the total sum of his skin. Here then, the visible become central to the constitution of racialised identity and the experience of race. The realm of the visual is invested with values, which produces and fixes the black body as different in the naturalisation of racist ideologies. As Fanon writes, he is responsible not only for his body, but, for his race and ancestors:

It was always the Negro teacher, the Negro doctor; brittle as I was becoming, I shivered at the slightest pretext. I knew, for instance, that if the physician made a mistake it would be the end of him and of all those who came after him. What could one expect, after all, from a Negro? As long as everything went well, he was praised to the skies, but look out, no nonsense, under any condition! The black physician can never be sure how close he is to disgrace. I tell you, I was walled in: No exception was



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made for my refined manners, or my knowledge of literature, or my understanding of the quantum theory. (Fanon 1967: 117)

The next stage of the destablisation of the corporeal schema, of the freedom of embodiment, lies in the black subject *internalising* this objectification - an internalisation that affects the construction of selfhood and autonomy. Just as in Foucault's (1977) account of the Panopticon where the prisoner internalises the warden's gaze, so too, the black subject internalises the epidermal racial schema. A sense of inferiority derived from the skin no longer requires the gaze of the other in order to be felt; the freedom and agency of the corporeal schema is shattered and the black individual find herself 'grasping for selfhood somewhere between nothingness and infinity (Henry 1997: 30). However, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, Fanon's employment of Sartre's negative ontology in this text doesn't allow for the disruption of white discursive and representational regimes. I shall propose that the movement of the dancing body in its spatio-temporal situatedness challenges the immutability of white racial norms. Fanon's problem is that he just can't dance! Or at least he doesn't dance enough.

For my purposes here however, Fanon enables the diasporic African to answer the question 'can you be a diasporic subject and not know it?' with an emphatic 'No'. Through the intervention of the epidermal schema, the diasporic African is forced into an awareness of diasporicity. This awareness results from the challenge of the imposition of a return to an "origin" that is inscribed and signified in and through the skin. As Fanon writes, '*I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of*

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*the “idea” that others have of me but of my own appearance’* (1967: 116 my emphasis).

The challenge to black humanity, proscribes both the possibility of historical agency and invalidates the structure of that history itself. Fanon’s child on the train negates the condition of the here-now present of the diaspora. Thus, each time the question ‘where are you *really* from?’ is posed, questions of the relationship between origin and embodiment are brought to the fore. In so doing, the assumptions behind the question lead to a refusal to engage with the embodied situation of the present, of the ‘where you’re at’. The racialised diasporic subject becomes fixed by the continuous play of the fixing regimes of race and ethnicity. And for as long as negation and denial continue to be the order of the day, diasporic subjects are forced into the ‘cultivation of a lost “where you’re from”’ (Ang 1994).

The significance of showing how the epidermal schema undermines and undercuts the freedom inherent in Merleau-Ponty’s corporeal schema is only undertaken by Fanon in order to find ways of surmounting it. His fundamental political ideal is one of a universal humanity. The power of his fusing of phenomenological and psychoanalytic themes lies in showing how difficult this transcendence of objectification must be. He writes: “But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together” (Fanon 1967: 112-3).

In sum, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodiment allows us to distinguish two forms of historicity. On the one hand, there is a conservative version, whereby the historical is



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that which is merely past and cannot be changed. In this instance 'origin' refers to a once-only inaugural moment. On the other hand, a transformative historicity is uncovered whereby the embodied subject transforms what is given through acts of motility. Merleau-Ponty assumes that the latter notion of transformation is pre-discursive. With Fanon however we see that what is needed in addition is a discursive and *reflective* form of historical transformativity. His account also shows that the pre-discursive form is only comprehensible within the sphere of its inter-relationship with the discursive field. Fanon shows then that transformativity cannot just be pre-discursive. Freedom and "dis-alienation" from the prison of appearance involves a reflective account of how the other positions the diasporic subject and attempts to naturalise this positioning through an over-investment in the visual register. And importantly, how diasporic black people negotiate this positioning in search of freedom and different mode of being beyond white supremacist logic.

With both Merleau-Ponty and Fanon in mind we can see how it is possible to bridge the gap between the experience of different moods of diasporicity. The war between these aspects of diasporic experience has been fought on two theoretical fronts: the 'where you're from', which is generally associated with essentialism, and the 'where you're at' aligned with anti-essentialist and anti-anti-essentialist discourse. I want to conclude this chapter by suggesting that a cleavage between these two moments is unnecessary and wholly untenable if we acknowledge that through embodiment, the black diaspora has been 'constituted in the experience of exile and struggle' (hooks 1991: 29). I suggest that the two moments are mutually implicated and are necessary for comprehending why

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diasporicity can be a source of both affirmative celebration and of melancholia and nostalgia.

Melancholia and nostalgia have their clearest articulation in various forms of afrocentric discourses and some strands of black popular music with their interest in a static and pure origin, the 'where you're from'. This position relates to the experience of diasporicity from a purely temporal and embodied connection to a bygone, unmediated past. This embodied relation to time fails to attend to the difference *spaces* and *places* of the present make for the diasporic subject. The other celebratory mood entails an affirmative relationship to diasporicity. This position celebrates the possibilities and the hybrid character of the diasporic embodied presence. This presence implies the body's implantation in a given place and the way this place structures modes of being and seeing in the world. This is epitomised in Gilroy's evocation of the rap song 'It ain't where you're from, it is where you're at'. It is only by confronting the conflict of diasporicity openly that we can begin to understand how the two moments in diasporic discourses are in fact intertwined

Thinking diaspora beyond the oppositional logic of *either* nostalgia of lost origins *or* the celebration of multi-originality is to become aware that these are two moments within the diasporic situation, of the here and now present facing its history. Whatever our own emotional stance, diaspora is as much about loss and nostalgia as it is about transformation and change. We need therefore to attune ourselves to the fact that just as one person can experience all these moments simultaneously, so too can a group



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defined apparently according to one mood or perspective can actually collectively experience the other. The constant inquiry into 'where you are from', or the demand to be just 'where you're at', militates against any easy celebration or any simple pain of diasporicity. It is in this way that we can understand why certain strands of afrocentric discourse prove to be so alluring to many diasporic black people. We must therefore understand that such discourse is grounded in e-motionality - the anxious emotional logic of a community that finds it difficult to accept a metaphysical homelessness in light of a history of dispossession. The sense of diaspora I will explore throughout this thesis, however, concerns a joy that knows its pain, unlike the affirmation of a painless joy that is celebrated in current writing and theory of diaspora.

## Chapter 2: “My race began as the Sea began”<sup>1</sup>: The Aquatics of Diaspora

As I argued in the previous chapter, diasporic experience is both situated and embodied. I suggested that each expression of identity is interwoven within the style or patterning of the body’s historical and cultural situatedness. With the black diaspora, this patterning exists within a socio-historical context of transportation, slavery, multiple migrations and the continued lived experience of disadvantage within the white supremacist capitalist system. In this chapter, I shall explore attempts to think in more detail about the origin and the evolution of the black diaspora through the work of two important black diasporic thinkers: Hortense Spillers and Paul Gilroy. In both works, diasporic identity is construed in terms of what can be called an *aquatic tension*, concretised through the figure of the ship. Both metaphor and literal vessel of diasporic dislocation and relocation, ships are presented as critical in the evolution of the black Atlantic, lying outside of a secure economy of territory or a spatially fixed dwelling. In this way, trope and history intertwine in the form of the Middle Passage and the slave ship at sea.

I begin with a reading of Spillers’ essay ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’ (1987). In this text, Spillers argues that the slave ship constitutes the *Ur-*moment of black diasporic identity. The Middle Passage is presented as a site of

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Derek Walcott’s poem ‘Names’ (1962)



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irrecoverable loss that disrupted African kinship structures. For Spillers, this experience has shaped African-American gender relations in the present. I will argue that while Spillers provides an important analysis of the positioning of enslaved Africans and slavery's relationship to the contemporary positioning of black women, the problem is that in assuming an absolute hiatus in the Middle Passage, she does not allow for constructive agency aboard the ship.

I then argue that, in contrast, the role of the ship in Gilroy's text, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) provides an analysis of the production of a recuperable affirmative black identity. For Gilroy, the ship represents the (re)fashioning and reworking of histories and traditions. I will contend that Gilroy's account is an improvement on Spillers' precisely because of this positive imaginative potential of the ship. However, I shall then argue that Gilroy is able to recuperate the ship as a positive element only in terms of decontextualisation from the political-economic situation that surrounded it at each instance. It is at this point that we will return to Spillers for precisely the kind of contextualisation that is missing in Gilroy's account.

By using Gilroy to highlight faults in Spillers' account and Spillers to do the same in reverse, I will, in finishing, begin to establish a position which combines what is significant and insightful in both. That is, I shall argue firstly that the figure of the ship can serve as the locus for a redemptive and wholly positive imaginative flotation of identity. Secondly, I will suggest that this imaginative figuration of the ship at sea can function redemptively only through being situated within the political-economic context

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of an ongoing history of pain and oppression. In this way, the real and inexpressible pain of journeys once made will be put in relation to the possibility of transforming their presence as traces within diasporic agency.

### Spillers' Aquatic Grammar

Spillers' 'Mama's Baby' (1987) offers an important, if ambiguous and convoluted, account of the positioning of enslaved Africans in relation to the contemporary positioning of African-American women. According to Elizabeth Abel, Spillers draws on 'a Lacanian discourse politicized through the African-American context' (1990: 187). Spillers begins by posing a challenge to the white Western essentialisation of gender as a universal biological category that is transferable across cultures and history. At the same time, she critiques Anglo-American feminism (in particular object-relations theory) for proposing that gender constitution and transmission takes place through "the reproduction of mothering" (Chodorow 1978). For Spillers, such claims fail to register 'the structures of values, the spectacle of symbols' (1985: 78) which ensured that black and white women's points of entry onto the world historical stage are different. For instance, she argues that in a context in which enslaved women were constituted as property, reproduction is not a reproduction of mothering but of *property*. In this historical moment, the female captive transmits her unfreedom to her offspring (Bakare-Yusuf 1997). From this critique, Spillers begins her argument about the relationship between the denial of gendered identity and racial violence by making a distinction between *flesh* and the *body*. In an earlier essay 'Interstices: A Small Drama of Words' Spillers argues that because of the



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history of slavery, diasporic Africans cannot participate in the same way as white women in feminist discourses on sexuality. The economic reduction, whereby African women were exchanged in the ‘market place of the flesh’ (1985: 76), violently disrupted and denied African naming patterns and kinship structures.

The distinction Spillers makes between the flesh and the body is important in understanding the denial of gender difference among people in captivity and the twentieth-century plight of African-American women. The flesh in Spillers’ text refers to the Lacanian *imaginary order* figured as autonomous African cultural practices prior to European appropriation, and the imposition of an other language and grammar. The flesh is the indeterminate, raw material of social constitution. However, with captivity, Africans were robbed of this capacity to reproduce and assert their own *symbolic order*. For Spillers, both historically *and* in the contemporary scene of ongoing violation against African-Americans, the flesh functions as the redemptive figure of a world prior to the violations of slavery. The flesh is therefore an attempt to capture the sense of community and self-definition before life in the New World – in visceral terms. In the language of the last chapter, the flesh is an emotion of diasporicity – a discursive attempt to come to terms with dispossession and the loss of cultural horizon. The flesh is therefore an emotional response to a perceived lack – in autonomous gender construction – rather than the name given to a specific historical moment or particular culture. A community of the flesh here and now does not and cannot take place – given the history of slavery and its effects on the present. In my view, it is precisely because of the difference of the diasporic present that the flesh as an originary actuality is not possible since it is itself an

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imagined origin. The flesh, Spillers tells us, is in fact *totally* concealed – revealing the extent of the ongoing dispossession for diasporic Africans. Part of Spillers' claim then is that the European appropriative symbolic has yet to lift away from diasporic African cultures. The flesh stands as a figure of resistance against this enframing – an ideal of the corporeal that collects community and justice in its wake. The absolute non-existence of the flesh within the European symbolic therefore represents the denial of autonomy in the time of a white hetero-patriarchal hegemony. The flesh therefore concerns survival in the midst of an ongoing history of hardship, violence and lack of gender distinction. As Spillers writes, the diasporic body, figured as flesh, is what 'carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival' (1987: 67).

In order to get more of a grasp of this notion of the flesh, it is worthwhile comparing it to the account of the flesh given by Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, the 'flesh' represents 'being, not as plenitude, self-identity, or substance but as divergence or non-coincidence - being's most elemental level' (Grosz 1994: 100). The flesh refers to the reciprocal intertwining of beings in the world. This intertwining does not meld into union; rather, reciprocal co-being is maintained through difference and separation. The flesh gestures towards an embodiment of community that can only be given as different, as that which presents itself as a trace or as a subversive potentiality. The flesh does not and cannot coincide or converge upon the present; it cannot be a simple given; it is 'being's dual orientation inward and outward, being's openness, its reflexivity' (ibid: 100).

For both Merleau-Ponty and Spillers, the flesh then stands for something like the paradox



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of a *corporeal ideal* - a yet-to-be-realised possibility for the body – a redemption from a disenchanted history and a dispossessed present (for the former, the legacy of dualist thought, for the latter, the legacy of slavery). The difference between the two accounts has to do with *time*. The flesh is not static for Merleau-Ponty; it refers to the world's temporal procession as it folds upon itself through relays of expression and response. The flesh therefore presents itself as a gathering that is forever displaced into the yet-to-come – a communication or transfer between all beings that perpetually re-opens the world to change beyond itself once again. In contrast, Spillers' flesh assumes a pristine, homogenised economy that is untouched by internal disruption and untroubled by social drama. In her account, the Atlantic Slave systems disturbed this structure, interrupting 'hundreds of years of African culture' (1987: 68). The flesh is thus denied the active engagement between embodied agents and historically changing and mutating social habitus in the manner of Merleau-Ponty's account. Again, it is perhaps the effects of the emotionality at work in Spillers' text, as a work of loss and mourning, that leads to the flesh being frozen into a figure of nostalgic yearning.

While Merleau-Ponty's account of the flesh compares with Spillers, his phenomenological approach ultimately does not provide an account of the power dynamics inflecting inter-subjective relations. In contrast, through the distinction she makes between *body* and *flesh*, Spillers provides a powerful account of the effacement and disruption of the communal ideal of the flesh. Enslavement invaded the potentiality of the flesh, transforming it into the inscribed surface that Spillers designates as the *body*. Spillers' "body" compares with Foucault's inscribed, disciplined and surveyed body. The

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captive African "body" is controlled by the demands of the master and economic imperatives. As in Foucault's account, the body in Spillers is imprinted by history, coded as a sign for enslavement and objectification, where raw violence, economic forces and ideological investment coalesce.<sup>2</sup> For Spillers, the captive body became the surface for horrific acts of torture, involving the laceration of the skin, giving way to 'woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh' (1987: 67). The body is that which is objectified, given a price, put to work and forced into the production and reproduction of plantation economy. Spillers argues that the objectification and commodification of the African body opened 'up the entire western hemisphere for the specific purpose of enslavement and colonization' (ibid: 71). In the process, the slavers were able to construct and consolidate their own identity as the captive communities were relegated to the position of non-being; the marketplace of flesh.

Sander Gilman makes a similar point in his essay 'Black Bodies, White Bodies' (1980). For Gilman, black female presence in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe enabled white people to assert their inherent difference from black people, and simultaneously sexualised the white world. The physical characteristics of the black female - her skin colour, her nose, her genitalia - especially, the so-called female Hottentot Venus, served as the representational and perceptual category for nineteenth century medical discourse

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<sup>2</sup> The implication of a disciplinary order at work on the captive African body nonetheless remains a blindspot of Foucault's work - strange for a thinker so engrossed in providing genealogies of modernity. Foucault's work on seventeenth and eighteenth century public spectacles of torture and nineteenth century strategies of surveillance in the production of the subject has been used to theorise the spectacle surrounding lynching (see Robyn Wiegman 1995)



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and aesthetic representation. Gilman notes that attention was focused on the enlarged buttocks of the Hottentot, which came to represent excessive, incommensurable sexuality and the source of corruption and disease. For Spillers, this investment into pathological corporeality and hyperbolic sexuality 'did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality' (1985: 76). Instead, black women represent the 'beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, waiting their verb. Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them' (ibid: 74). The captive body, Spillers writes,

becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; [...] at the same time - in stunning contradiction - the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being* for the captor; [...] in this absence *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness"; [...] as a category of physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness", resonating through various centres of human and social meaning. (1987: 67)

This generalised powerlessness and woundedness coincided with dehumanising *naming* practices. In the context of enslavement and colonisation, naming is aligned with power and ownership. The inscription on the flesh through laceration is perpetuated and rendered meaningful through its substitution in language. Within the new symbolic, ascension into language authorised the power to name, to establish and impose Law onto the world, but only for the enslaver(s). Located within a new symbolic as a dehumanised

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commodity, the power to name and 'make the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world' (Baldwin 1951: 49 -50) was denied to the captives. Spillers sees the significance of the power to name as imperative to survival. She writes, 'Sticks and bricks *might* break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us' (1987: 68). The different names African-American women have been known by within the dominant symbolic order - "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar", "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother", "Aunty", "Granny", God's "Holy Fool", a "Miss Ebony", or "Black Woman at the Podium"(Spillers 1987: 65) - 'demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative' (ibid: 69).

In his book, *The Wounded Body: Remembering the Markings of Flesh* (2000), Dennis Patrick Slattery, links acts of wounding to practices of naming. 'Our wounds', he writes, 'name us and give the trajectory of our destiny. They identify and mark us. Our name, along with our wound, records us in the world' (2000: 15). Finally, he asks: 'do our names in some way wound us as well?'(ibid:15). Spillers' reply would be an emphatic 'yes', for as she writes, 'naming [is] one of the key sources of bitter Americanizing for African persons' (1987: 73). As noted in the last chapter, this is the moment when the corporeal schema of the flesh is challenged by the violence and the force of technologies of vision Fanon characterises as the 'historico-racial schema'. Spillers argues that being named and marked as property is the key element in understanding the contemporary negative positioning of black diasporic subjects. Henceforth, the quest for contemporary renaming is a matter of survival. Spillers therefore presents the displaced, specularised body, especially the female diasporic African body, as the objectified, violated and



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mechanised captive state of a repressed flesh.

For Spillers, being dislocated, misnamed and reduced to a commodified property, constituted 'a high crime against the flesh' (1987: 67). This crime is even more pronounced when set against the background of a prior corporeal harmony: 'If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard' (ibid:67). In this account (common to both Spillers and Fanon), the relationship between "captives" seems to correspond with flesh (corporeal schema) and the "liberated" with body (historico-racial schema).

The distinction outlined here between flesh and body frames Spillers' idea of the fundamental relation between gender constitution and place. As Elizabeth Abel (1990) observes in her reading of 'Mama's Baby', Spillers follows orthodox Lacanian thought by linking gender constitution with the domestic. More specifically, the domestic is highlighted in Spillers' text as a fundamental site of significance. Implicit in her argument is the merging of flesh onto the production of gender within the home. The domestic is both *the* primary site of gender constitution *and* offers the most stable site for *refiguring* a dispossessed black (male and female) gendered body. For Spillers, "'gendering" takes place within the confines of the domestic' (1987: 72). It is here that proper names, inheritance, identity and socio-cultural normativity are established and reproduced. The domestic is 'an essential metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for the male and female subject over a wider ground of human and social purposes' (ibid: 72).

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As such, the slavers' hold, with its human cargo, cannot be seen as an element of the domestic (Spillers 1987: 72). For captive communities, situated outside the domestic and within the frame of the body not flesh, gender identity is effaced. The domestic sphere is posited as the *only* discursive context for gender constitution. To speak of the 'domestic' therefore is to mark the site of a return home, to a secure economy, to the familiar - in this case, to the flesh of an African foundational homeland. And outside of the context of an original home, kinship and gender structures are skewed or perverted: 'The human cargo of a slave vessel - in the fundamental effacement and remission of African family and proper names - offers a counter-narrative to notions of the domestic' (ibid: 72). The slave-hold is the other side of the domestic, its grotesque parody. In this reversal of sociality, Abel writes that 'not only is gender severed from biology but also that "biology" shifts [...] from the arena of sexual difference' (1990: 188).

For Spillers, the slave ship constitutes the founding moment of flesh turning to body and the effacement of African kinship structure. In her text, the slave ship or Middle Passage cannot in any way be redeemed as a positive, hybrid space of black diasporicity. Dramatically, Spillers reads the suspension at sea in the paradoxical terms of an *absolute* violation of hitherto inviolable frameworks - specifically gender structure and its connection to the home-place-domestic unit. Spillers writes,

First off all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a *theft* of the body - a willful and violent [...] severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active. Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference



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in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political manoeuvre, not at all gender related, gender-specific. (Spillers 1987: 67)

The sublime inexpressibility of the Middle Passage and slavery is the effect of this inviolable violation. As the conduit for the transfer of African bodies, the slave ship is thus posited as a vessel of effacement, brutalisation and a commodification that at the same time robbed Africans of their gender identity.

It is worthwhile at this early stage to note how this figuration of the *place* of the ship and the Middle Passage compares with other theorisations in which the Middle Passage constitutes an imaginative resource for a transformative diasporic sensibility. For example, as I will show in a moment, for Gilroy the ship is characterised as a positive, hybrid black imaginative vessel. Again, Wilson Harris reconceptualises the slave ship as a place that engendered a new cultural practice, concretised in the form of a dance - *limbo*. The limbo dance is an important element of Caribbean cultural life; it involves the gradual lowering of the body in order to pass through to the other side of the pole with the knees first. For Harris, the limbo dance emerged out of the constricted space and the distorted spider-like poses Africans were forced into aboard the slave ship. This dance created a bridge, or, as Harris puts it, a 'gateway which dislocates (and therefore begins to free itself from) a uniform chain of miles across the Atlantic' (1970: 159). In this reformulation, the ship emerged as 'the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of

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cultures' (ibid: 158).

Under Spillers' scrutiny, however, there can be no redemptive conceptualisation of the ship as the rebirth of 'a new corpus of sensibility'. The slavers' ship and the patterns of relations generated can only be theorised as a profound site of historical terror and trauma that continues to assert its force in the contemporary. As Spillers writes,

Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated", and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (1987: 68)

Using the Freudian term "oceanic" 'as an analogy for undifferentiated identity' (1987: 72), Spillers contends that insofar as the captives were 'literally suspended in the "oceanic", they could not assume a gendered position. It should be clear that Spillers is aware of the 'application of gender rule' in the spatial organisation of the slavers' hold and the routine sexual violation of slave women. However, the kind of theoretical register she pursues takes the symbolic and juridical disregard for the gender of the captive as the final



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indication of the captives' status. Moreover, she is insistent that within the legal and discursive context that positioned the captive communities as sub-human, economic reproducing machines, gender identity is effaced.

By being literally suspended in the 'oceanic', Africans 'were also nowhere at all'. Spillers writes, 'we could say that they were the culturally "unmade", thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that "exposed" their destinies to an unknown course' (ibid: 72). This oceanic suspension is 'a metaphor of the slave's perpetually suspended social definition' (Abel 1990: 188). It also inaugurated the conditions of insecurity and anxiety that are still today a feature of diasporic male and female experience.

But, in keeping with Gilroy and Harris, we could argue that in this situation, the slaves could have asked, as the African-American rap group Public Enemy would later ask, 'What's the time?' And the response, 'It's Nation time', could have marked the prelude to transformation, to rebellion, to the forging of connection across difference, to transcending historical time by 'asserting the irreducible priority of the present' (Gilroy 1993: 202). What Spillers passes over is the possibility that even in extreme situations the opportunities for resistance exist in the shadow of external imprint of power. Against this, Spillers wants to show that gendered practices existed within a symbolic and legal order that denied 'every feature of social and human differentiation [...] regarding the African-American person' (1987: 78).

In sum, for Spillers, the ship is particularised historically as the site of an absolute

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disruption of the ideal fleshed existence. It therefore cannot be recuperated as a positive space, nor is it ever a cause for celebration. In this argument, the Atlantic becomes a site of a painful black diasporic hiatus. From Spillers' account it would appear that the "catastrophic rupture" of the Middle Passage forces a repositioning of origin, specifically an origin based on the aqueous. Spillers is drawing on the image of the ocean in relation to the metaphor of "the oceanic state" - for example, the foetus floating inside the mother's amniotic fluid. The rupture of the Middle Passage is therefore figured as a violent and metaphorical return to the womb, in order to suffer rebirth in the inscribed, historical slave body. It is this figuration which allows her to insist that the "aquatic" and violated flesh is without gender. Through challenging the fundamentality or 'grammar' of gender, assumed in Anglo-American feminism, Spillers outlines an identity without 'ground', an *aquatic* suspended identity. However, Spillers presents this origin as a profound disruption of the connection between identity and territory, and correlatively the self-donating power of naming. A loss of territory is for her ultimately a loss of selfhood. The Middle Passage is therefore a site of cultural chaos, separation and irreparable loss and longing. In this text, Spillers makes no separation between the 'experience of separation which is painful, difficult, and psychically violent, and the violence of domination which is a very different thing' (Weir 1996: 150).

### **Gilroy's Black Atlantic**

In contrast with Spillers' negative oceanic trajectory is Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Gilroy proposes another method of conceptualising the history of the



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black diaspora that moves away from specific periodisations - of a backward looking pre-colonial Africa and a forward looking North America. Instead, he proposes that we embrace the ways in which *roots* are figured and reconfigured in the black Atlantic imaginary in the multiple *routes* diasporic Africans have taken in the continuous process of *routing* and *re-rooting*. This allows him to 'reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity and historical memory' (Gilroy 1993: 16) that are central to African-American intellectuals' quest for freedom and justice during and after slavery. Like Spillers, Gilroy also opens up this enterprise by troping the marine and the naval. Ships and the fluid excessivity of the water offer Gilroy a "chronotype" for thinking about an identity that is not anchored to one national territory but rather favours the global and transatlantic 'circulation of ideas and activities' (ibid: 4). As with Spillers, for Gilroy ships have a central place in the black diasporic imagination. They evoke the transatlantic commerce in African bodies that is central to understanding the experience of diasporic black people and their positioning *vis-à-vis* European modernity:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship - a living, micro-political system in motion - is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons [...] Ships immediately focus attention on the Middle Passage. (ibid: 4)

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The horror of the Middle Passage and the condition of unfreedom are, in Spillers' words, the 'ethical and sentimental features that tied [black people together] across the landscape to others [...] in a common fabric of memory and inspiration' (1987: 75). According to Gilroy however, such a historical experience generated its antithesis, articulated in the 'various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship' (Gilroy 1993: 16). Ships and the Middle Passage constitute an important symbol of the 'various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland' (ibid: 4), as well as the cross border dialogue with the modern West, acting as the catalyst for revolts, resistance struggle and distinct political, philosophical and expressive cultures. According to Joan Dayan, for Gilroy, ships become an important 'vessel of transit and means to knowledge' (1996: 7).

The ship is therefore offered as a chronotype for a metaphysics of history not grounded in an original home or a land-based topography but through complex hybrid trans-national interactions. This perspective acknowledges the interplay of history. That is, the ship in the ocean is recognised as a movement *between* histories and *across* cultures and geographical spaces. Historical and cultural fixity of ownership is denied through a fluid tropism. For Gilroy, the various voyages across the Atlantic produce a processuality that is not restricted to the New World or the Old World, nor do they represent the *loss* of cultural horizon, rather they produce the opening up of new histories and the imaginative transformation of cultural meanings. The Atlantic becomes the site of memory and loss. In his book, *Song of the Earth*, Michel Haar writes that the sea is 'the place of forgetfulness but where forgetfulness turns into memory, an impoverished place, a place of solitude and extreme errancy ("without paths"), but where all richness commences'



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(1993: 144). Suspended between existences at sea, the African is therefore not the person she was at the beginning of the voyage, but she is not yet what she will become. She has no history, or the history she has becomes just one history among many. With such a mode of subjectivity, history and memory are integrated within an aquatic suspension of rich possibilities. The elemental suspension at sea therefore open up new forms of histories, subjectivities and cultures that are in the process of being articulated and re-articulated.

Gilroy's emphasis on the suspension of the elemental does not suggest a loss of subjectivity or history, but rather a construction of identity that is divorced from the fixity of land and national borders<sup>3</sup>. In other words, the sea does not mimic or trope the groundlessness of a deconstruction that empties the subject of all content and all means of expression. According to Gilroy, black identity can be 'understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists, and language gamers' (1993: 102). Rather, the images of the naval and the marine allow Gilroy to *rework* the subject's relation to its outside, to its environment and what might be considered as 'its own'. This incorporation of alterity with the subject destabilises any notion of a singular and national origin. Here Gilroy references African-American thinkers and artists as diverse as Edward Wilmot Blyden, W.E.B Dubois, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison, whose influences extend beyond their national border. I suggest that this grounding of identity in the suspension of the ship

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<sup>3</sup> But as Madan Sarup rightly insists, identities are situated and 'limited by borders and boundaries' (1994: 94). Indeed, Gilroy's critique of black cultural nationalists and Afro-centric thinkers reveal that his own

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prevents the stamp of ownership on the fluid, excessivity of the sea. For Haar, the sea is 'an unpossessed, unpossessable place where every mark of ownership, where every limit, is effaced, an elemental place' (1993: 149). An aquatic identity thus opens up new cultural horizon to be explored, reworked and assimilated into the collective cultural repertoire.

Anchoring the black diaspora within the infinite fluidity of the sea, Gilroy aims to destabilise what he calls 'cultural nationalism', 'ethnic absolutism' or 'racial essentialism'. He rightly rebukes black nationalists such as Molefi Kete Asante (1988) who fail to accept the hybrid and creole origins of black identity and cultural production (Gilroy 1993: 73). According to Gilroy, hybridity is rejected in this discourse because slavery is seen as a 'site of victimage and thus tradition's intended erasure' (ibid: 189). Gilroy also argues against theories that seek to disentangle enlightenment modernity from the brutality of racial slavery by suggesting that 'racial terror is not merely compatible with occidental rationality but cheerfully complicit with it' (Gilroy 1993: 56). However, while it is true that Gilroy mounts a powerful challenge against some of the excesses of black nationalism, it is also true that he often oversteps the mark. For instance, George Lipsitz asserts that Gilroy 'defines as "essentialist" just about any strategy that relies on ethnic solidarity' (1995: 197).

Nonetheless, Gilroy's locating of black diasporic identity within the 'aqueous tension' of the Middle Passage and the memory of slavery entails that the notion that purity,

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diasporic identity remain limited national boundary.



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ownership and nationality as the 'ground' of culture is contested. The insistent relation between identity and territory on earth is denied by de-centering any emphasis that would otherwise be placed on the latter. In Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, black identity, tradition, cultural production and origin are therefore reconfigured as a multiple originary suspension, a bracketing of the historical, a rupture that will open up a hybrid history and plural cultural forms to come. Gilroy's project is therefore akin to the archaeology of history described by Wilson Harris in his important essay 'History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas' (1970). Here, Harris calls for a re-writing of Caribbean history that acknowledges the 'gateways between civilisations, between technological and spiritual apprehensions, between racial possessions and dispossession' (1970: 166). Gilroy thus wants us to read his text and the black diaspora as a celebration of 'mongrel cultural forms [...] cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents' (Gilroy 1993: 2-3).

One of the sources for Gilroy's alternative historicity and challenge to a territorial conception of identity is the philosophy of Nietzsche. It is worthwhile reciting one of the quotes that preface the book, taken from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, headed 'In the horizon of the infinite':

We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned the bridges behind us - indeed we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean: to be sure, it does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries

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of graciousness. But hours will come when you realize that it is infinite and there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt free now strikes the walls of this cage! Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more *freedom*-and *there is no longer any "land"*. (Nietzsche 1974: 180 my emphasis added)

That this is one of the quotes prefacing *The Black Atlantic* is a powerful reminder of Gilroy's quest to disentangle racial identity from territorialism. Gilroy, however, leaves this dense passage unexplored, as if its work is the thematic overture to the explicit thematisations of his text. This is a pity, because there is much in the text that needs to be made explicit. In Nietzsche's text, there is a positive affirmation of movements; away from land, from fixity, from dwelling, from what Luce Irigaray has called the 'mechanics of the solid' towards 'the "mechanics" of the fluid' (1985 106 - 107). This also entails destroying all that is associated with the land: mastery, property, 'national self-determination' (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993: 711). The passage embraces journeys into the unknown, into the unbounded ocean and into a place beyond dwelling, beyond the horizon. It is a celebration of potentialities, of contradictions, of limitlessness, of infinity and flows. An opening into new dreams and dreaming - gracious reveries. An invitation to forsake attachment to residency while taking refuge in the continuous flow of the unbounded ocean where ships criss-cross each other, creating wakes as they go.

But Nietzsche's text is not only a *celebration* of the journey away from land; there is also a moment of fear, when the vastness of the elemental threatens to submerge the subject



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through the aphasia of the sublime: when hours are spent mesmerised by the awesomeness of the infinite. At this moment, a desire for a return to the land itself is rendered impossible. The last statement ‘Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more *freedom* - and there is no longer any “land”’ can be read as a caution against any notion of an unproblematical non-transformative return. The futility of nostalgia is revealed. As I argued in the previous chapter, once the seaward journey is embarked upon, there can never be a return to the land. At least, the land can never be the same; it cannot endure as the receptacle for the same flesh. For dispossessed communities, the land can no longer be a territory or a possession on which we can unproblematically stamp our identity on, even as it becomes the site of yearning and nostalgic investment. Embarkation means that the land has been transformed because *we* have been transformed - by the journey, and by the suspension of history that is the encounter with the elemental. In this way the passage can be read as homage to forgetting: forgetting not as *tabula rasa*, but as I shall argue in a moment, as that which motivates action in the present. In other words, here, forgetting is active, an activity, involving memory as hiatus, and the site of renascence – the birth of a new culture and means of expression.

For Gilroy then, the encounter with the elemental provides a counter-narrative to the desire for purity and cultural proprietary. On board the ships, slaves and freed were between histories and cultural imprints. The Atlantic becomes the shared history of Europe and the Africans they enslaved. As Derek Walcott writes, 'The sea is history'; the fluid tension that constitutes and animate the black diaspora:

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My race began as the sea began,  
with no nouns, and with no horizon,  
with pebbles under my tongue  
with a different fix on the stars. (Walcott 1976: 305)

This elemental non-foundational metaphysics is what Gilroy offers as the birth of a new mode of conceptualising the Black Atlantic. His troping of the elemental is a way of mapping a reconfigured origin - in the plural - for the African diaspora. Rather than the site of absolute loss and memory, as in Spillers' account, the ship is celebrated as the engine of new forms of cultural expression. Diasporic cultural production such as music is offered as the clearest articulation of these new plural origins.

Gilroy's passion for the interstitial imaginative productivity of the ship through the history of modernity parallels Foucault's notion of *heterotopia* as discussed in his essay 'Of Other Spaces'. For Foucault, a heterotopia is a space that is in process with itself, a temporal object open to difference and alterity. Foucault writes,

Brothels and colonies are two extreme types of heterotopia, and if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat



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has not only been for our civilisation, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development [...] but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia *per excellence*. (1986: 27)

This passage is the closest Foucault gets to discussing slavery and colonialism, which, it has to be said, is not very close! The subject in his imagery is the male sailor, who is *not* a slave, and who is bound to visit successive brothels as his ship moves from point to point in its colonial quest. The heterotopia is a paradigmatic contested space whose name is challenged across time. For Foucault, like Gilroy, the ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. As a complex temporal object, the ship connects civilisations and reveals the 'treasures they conceal in their gardens' (Foucault 1986: 27). Although they are aware of the ship as a 'great instrument of economic development' (ibid: 27), both theorists however place greater emphasis on its imaginative potential.

### **The Political Economic Decontextualisation of the Ship**

At this juncture, after uncovering the redemptive recuperation of the ship in Gilroy's project, I am led to what I find problematic in his celebration of the naval hybrid. Gilroy is able to construct a wholly positive aquatic experience of black diasporic identity only on the basis of a fundamental lack of *context*. In a sense, this decontextualisation is a deliberate ploy, because the ship is being used as a metaphor or trope. However, using the ship as a metaphor is itself a form of reduction. The figure of the ship *as figure* serves to bracket out different situations and contexts within which other times and other

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journeys are inscribed. As 'a complex temporal object' differentiating itself across time, the journey of the ship and slavery cannot be divorced from the specific contexts of their production and the economics of the sailing. What is missing in Gilroy's aqueous discourse is a balance between metaphor, imagination and the concrete historical situations of global capitalism and how they combine to shape black Atlantic cultures. Spillers' text provides a complementary remedy to this by highlighting the economic relations and exploitation lurking in the image of the ship.

Aside from his comment that slavery is 'capitalism with its clothes off', Gilroy does not specify in any satisfactory way how networks of power, economic flows and gendered identity contribute to the development of racial consciousness and the capitalist world system. By over-dramatising the link between slavery and European Enlightenment modernity, Gilroy cannot make the point that the paradox of development and underdevelopment in Africa, the Caribbean and North America (so well explored by Walter Rodney (1972), Eric Williams (1964), Manning Marable (1983) and others) continues to push Africans and diasporic Africans away from their cultural habitus as they search for material betterment. In so doing, Gilroy renders

"belated," [...] the vast and collective historical experiences - of indenture, wage labor, forced migration, colonization, etc - that subtended and existed alongside slavery and that are as inextricably constitutive of the modern world as slavery is. (Neil Lazarus 1995: 334)



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Thus, in presenting slavery as a dominating form of discontinuity within modernity, 'what might have been gained by the application of the concept of the capitalist world system is lost in the application of the concept of the black Atlantic' (Lazarus 1995: 334). I suggest that a singular focus on the ship as figure and metaphor is overly reductive. Whilst slavery was certainly a significant rupture in modernity, it was by no means the grounding and root cause of all its discontinuities. It is much more plausible to suggest a complex array of factors that affected each other to produce a shifting series of discontinuities of which trans-Atlantic slavery is a significant aspect.

Focusing attention on the economics of the slave ship, Spillers reveals not only the terror and the agony *anterior* to the joys and all 'the playful diasporic intimacy that has been a marked feature of transnational black Atlantic creativity' (Gilroy 1993: 16), but also its economics. In Gilroy's account, the differences at work in the production of diasporic experience tend to be reduced in the direction of a unified imaginative potential and a de-economised 'purely cultural' exchange. The redemption through the image of the ship therefore enacts a *reduction* upon how we consider the *experience* at work within these different contexts. A positive recuperation of the Middle Passage, by weaving it with the broader stitching of Black Atlantic cultural production, threatens to disentangle it from economic relations and the way in which this relation continues to impact on black cultural production.

Nowhere in Gilroy's account is there room for the difference between the *forced* or

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economically motivated journeys towards the unknown (towards the Americas or to Britain or wherever the auction block may be) and the *voluntary* self-exploratory journeys on ships of Wright, the Fisk singers and so on. The joy and rapture accorded to the Fisk Jubilee singers, who sang “No More Auction Block for Me” to the gleeful pleasure of the Prince of Wales in the early 1870s cannot be compared with that of the captive bodies in chains who were directed from the ships towards the auction block. Whilst Gilroy would probably not want to make such a comparison, he nevertheless collapses the two, in such a way that his metaphorical ship does not allow itself to encounter the difference between ships bound by pain and ships bound for pleasure, self-exploration and quest for freedom and citizenship.

Although Spillers’ argument also privileges slavery, she is nonetheless careful to argue for a specificity to the historical structure of the Middle Passage. For Spillers, the slave ship has its own real economy - a scale of economically rational measures. As was mentioned above, this is illustrated in the ‘application of gender rule’ in the spatial organisation of the slavers’ ship. Citing Elizabeth Donnan’s work on slavery, Spillers notes that men were allowed six feet by one foot and girls four feet six by one. These ‘scaled inequalities’ meant, however, that women were ‘nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart’ (1987: 72). In this instance we lose gender differentiations:

one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into “account”  
as quantities. The female in “Middle Passage”, as the apparently smaller



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physical mass, occupies “less room” in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart. (ibid: 72)

Here, Spillers provides an economic contextualisation that contrasts with Gilroy’s utopic conceptualisation of the ship and the elemental. Far from being a positive space, the ship inaugurated what Spillers calls the 'profitable "atomizing" of the captive body' (1987: 68). For Spillers, the captives' bodies were not only marked as reproductive commodities; they also became the conduits for medical research.

Among the myriad uses to which the enslaved community was put, Goodell identifies its value for medical research: "Assortments of diseased, damaged, and disabled Negroes, deemed incurable and otherwise worthless are bought up, it seems...by medical institutions, to be experimented and operated upon, for purposes of 'medical education' and the interest of medical science. (Goodell cited in Spillers 1987: 68)

In refusing to map the 'myriad uses' to which knowledge was put and the commodification of bodies, Gilroy unwittingly reduces all ships *and* slavery to the kind of relativism that he is overtly keen to distance himself from. He is unable to think the ship beyond its transformative bridging metaphors. Although "contamination", "hybridity", "complicity", "racial terror" are constant refrains in his text, the Middle Passage and slavery are ultimately an opportunity to declare a mature transnational black Atlantic

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network of exchange at home with difference and conversant in Western European political and philosophical discourses. For Gilroy, these transnational intellectuals pleasurable celebrate impurities as they push beyond the boundary of national perspectives (1993: 87). Despite Gilroy's transnational outlook, we do not reach an understanding of how black identity and expressive forms are interwoven within global capital production. Of course, it would be absurd to reduce these issues to economics alone. However, we cannot simply overlook how networks of power, interests and economic relations affect and mediate identity and cultural production. After all, Gilroy's most venerated cultural form- music - is itself the black cultural form that is open to the greatest mass commodification.

What Spillers' historico-economic contextualisation of the ship suggests is that, important as the ship and the elemental suspension is to rethinking history, identity and the metaphorico-linguistic problematics of the "ground", it is imperative that we make a distinction between *forms* of suspension. There is a different form of suspension at work for objectified captives 'thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness' (Spillers 1987: 72), waiting in terror, from that experienced by Du Bois, Wright, or Soul II Soul, or to that produced by globe-trotting, waiting in harbours, in airports or in dj boxes. How can we understand in terms of cultural exchange the experience of the unfreed gathering the strength of waiting - singing unheeded songs as they keep vigil and await the daystar in the hold of the slave ship? We cannot. In contrast, the slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano illustrates difference in forms of suspension at sea:



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[The sea, the slave ship] filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, when I was carried on board the ship. I was immediately handled, and tossed up to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. (cited in Spillers 1987: 69)

Although obvious, it is worth reiterating in the face of Gilroy's text that the Equianos of the Middle Passage were not free subjects entering a self-chosen space; rather, their enforcement into the ship was ruled by the violence of economy and the economy of violence which sought to transform them into productive and reproductive machines.

Of course, specific situations within the period reveal specific differences - none of which Gilroy's generalised and quasi-metaphorical account can articulate. Whilst some slaves travelled as captives, in other situations a more complex scenario was at work. As Joan Dayan argues, by collapsing different forms of suspension into one framework, Gilroy cannot account for 'the conversion of emancipated blacks into movable property, periodically sent out of the United States to Haiti from 1824 to 1864' (Dayan 1996: 10). Indeed, according to Dayan, Gilroy 'fails to account for the kind of self-invention necessitated by a racist Union' (1996: 11) which sent Fredrick Douglass to lead a black nation such as Haiti. Gilroy's carefully chosen trans-Atlantic figures are like the figure of the exile described by Haar in the text referred to above. Drawing on figures from the poetry of Saint-John Perse, notably that of *The Stranger*, *The Wanderer and Nomad*, *The Pilgrim*, Haar notes how the exilic condition in Perse is devoid of a political frame,

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It is an exile within being that excludes every political or even psychological connotation[...] these insistent figures of the exile in the poetry of Perse are not men driven out, persecuted like the contemporary refugee, dissident, expatriate; they do not suffer mortally like those banished or ostracised from ancient cities. Joy and rapture accompany them on their journey. Where are they going? Toward an abode both more humble and richer, nearer and more remote. (1993: 148)

These exiles do not suffer the anxiety of *waiting* in terror associated with an unknown destination. One might respond here by saying that there *is* a political context to Gilroy's travellers. I would respond in turn that the fact that Gilroy collapses such different scenarios within one poetical framework is *itself* a work of profound theoretical decontextualisation of the political. Aboard the ships, these interstitial figures travel with relative ease, even if freedom has been and continues to be fought for. In contrast, for the captives, 'packed like so many live sardines among the immovable objects' (Spillers 1987: 70), the space of the ship, 'a place without a place' (Foucault 1986: 27), was the site of trauma - far from being the pleasurable hybridity Gilroy is keen to celebrate.

While I agree with Gilroy's attempt to redeem the Middle Passage in the context of an ongoing history of journeys of cultural exchange, I cannot agree with the way in which he does it. The pain of journeys by ship has to be grounded in historically specific



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experience. In Gilroy's account, the figuration of the ship denies the complex structures at work in the making of the black diaspora. As I have suggested, Spillers corrects this denial in her expression of the hiatus of experience and discontinuity across the Middle Passage by drawing attention to the economy of the ship and the discursive effacement of gender among the enslaved. The same specificity must be applied to naval journeys of joy and exploration of all the Grand Tours of the modern African-American intellectuals and cultural producers. Only after this historical, economic and phenomenological context has been worked through can we attempt to produce a redemptive synthesis concretised in the historico-imaginative construct of the ship. Only then can the ship become *antiphonal*.

### Neutralising Gender Difference

Gilroy's failure to map the different historical and economic circumstances of ships crossing the Atlantic is plagued by yet another parallel deficit: the failure to engage in any sustained manner with the specificities of *experience* on his ship. This oversight prevents him from exploring how gender, class, nationality, economic status and education affect transatlantic migratory experience from slavery till the present. According to Stefan Helmreich, the transatlantic journeys and experiences described by Gilroy were 'available only to those politically and economically positioned in a male-dominated public sphere' (1992: 245). Although Gilroy wishes to argue against this reading by suggesting that European travels by New World Africans were not the exclusive preserve of men, in reality the Atlantic experiences he privileges were usually more accessible, and at an

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earlier time, to men rather than to women. For example as noted by Spillers, African men constituted a large part of the human cargo that made the initial transatlantic journey. Following Herbert Klein's work on African internal slavery, Spillers argues that this has to do with the instructions given to Europeans merchants to buy more men than women, and also because women were central to the internal African slave market. Against this, Spillers argues that 'this observation does not change the reality of African women's captivity and servitude in New World communities' (1987: 72). Spillers invites us to reflect on the 'fate of the pregnant female captive and the unborn' (ibid: 73); and in so doing, she introduces the irreducibly embodied aspects of life on board the ship. At this stage, we can begin to imagine the difference in experience for men and women in the Middle Passage. While both men and women experienced the brutal effect of the Middle Passage, women were particularly vulnerable to sexual victimisation and the pains of childbirth. Describing the horrors of the slave ship, bell hooks points out that little attention was paid to the welfare of pregnant women as they were forced to occupy compartments of 16 by 18 feet (1982: 18):

The women who survived the initial stages of pregnancy gave birth aboard ship with their bodies exposed to either the scorching sun or the freezing cold. The numbers of black women who died during childbirth or the number of stillborn children will never be known. (ibid: 18-19)

Spillers regards the inattention to the fate of the expectant mother in the Middle Passage



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as a denial of motherhood; which within the dominant society, 'is the *only* female gender there is' (1987: 73). Both hooks' and Spillers' accounts thus reveal the hidden drama of specifically female aspects of experience in the Middle Passage that cannot be simply theorised away in an effort to assert the process of black Atlantic male subject constitution.

It is essentially men who steer Gilroy's ship towards the quest for freedom, citizenship, autonomy, resistance and hybrid cultural production. In terms of his choice of examples, such as Frederick Douglass in flight with Covey, or Richard Wright and W.E.B. Dubois off to France and Germany and later Africa, or rappers and djs struggling to refuse coercion within national borders - all demonstrate explicit, transparent acts of male resistance. His project is geared towards a celebration of African-American male activities and yet again linking men with the heroism of subjective and creative transcendence (Boyce-Davies 1994, Davis 1998). At this point, we may question the choice of Gilroy's *examples* as privileging a certain outlook that are again de-economised and masculinist.

This is not to deny that Gilroy's male optics bears insights, in that it offers an important articulation of African-American male experience and identities in the New World. However, his refusal to map the ways in which these experiences are inextricably tied to, or differ from, the experience of women is a major flaw in his project. Only Toni Morrison's fictional account - *Beloved* (1987) - is allowed a place at this Captain's table. However, insofar as he does not engage with female experience or in any explicit terms

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the relationship between travel and gendered identity, Gilroy's transatlantic does not depart from the general equation of voyage with the activities of men. James Clifford has argued that 'when diasporic experience is viewed in terms of displacement rather than placement, travelling rather than dwelling, and disarticulation rather than rearticulation, then the experiences of men will tend to dominate' (1994 258-9). While I agree with Clifford's position, there is however a problem with associating women with "dwelling" and men with "travelling". For as Carol Boyce-Davis argues, 'women *do travel*, and the issue is to find ways of understanding these negotiations of the road, since we do not all have "the same access to the road"' (1994: 132). In privileging the experience of black men on ship Gilroy blocks the experience of women as travellers, in particular black women whose migratory histories have been linked to men and the relations of capital. Diasporic discourses, as Brah argues, are always entangled within the complex web of travel and dwelling (1996).

In contrast, for Spillers, thrown together as human cargo, denied the 'benefits of a *patriarchalized* female gender', dislocated from their African homeland, the slave ship constitutes a site of total eradication through denial of African kinship structure and gender identity. She makes this claim on the basis of a primordial relation between place, specifically the domestic and identity; and she thus argues that the ship's hold is 'not an element of the domestic' (1987:72). While Spillers' account offers an important corrective to the androcentricism of Gilroy's ship, the basis for her account of gender disruption is, however, problematic. I now want to argue against Spillers' ungendering thesis by suggesting that in grounding gender identity in the domestic she overlooks two



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important issues. First, she ignores the different articulation of gender differences that the captives brought with them or were in the process of reworking. Second, she de-emphasises the relationship between space and embodiment and how they combine to construct and transform identities, experience, knowledge and social relations.

### *Gender and Place*

As already argued, insofar as we are embodied subjects occupying a space, we always exist in relation to a place. The lived body cannot exist outside of place. For Casey, existence itself is intimately bound up with place. 'Place' he writes, 'is not just an invocation of a locatory or situational space, it belongs to the very concept of existence' (1993: 15). Bodies are shaped, disciplined, revered, and transformed by the place in which they are located. Similarly, bodies transform place, give it meaning. With this in mind, we can say that the *situated body* occupies the status of a fundamental ontology: the body is a primary element of being. This has been implicitly recognised in much recent theory. For example, a spatially grounded account of the body occupies an important place in contemporary feminist attempt to theorise difference among women. Adrienne Rich's (1986) notion of the "politics of location" and Donna Haraway's (1991) concept of "situated knowledge" draw this into focus when they argue that women's occupation and orientation in space and time is invested with social, symbolic and historical meanings which shapes their experience and the production of knowledge. Developing the idea that every speaking subject is a *situated subject*, feminists like Rich and Haraway hope to avoid the globalising and exclusionary tendencies that has plagued much of white

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Western feminist theory. Rich argues that our positioning in different locations are also historically situated and they form and inform the ways in which we live out our identities. Situating female embodiment therefore is an opening towards acknowledging such differences.

From this perspective, we can posit that even the ship, as a transitory space in which the slaves were located, can be seen as a particular place; a place storing human as well as non-human cargo. As Susanne Langer affirms, whilst a ship constantly changes its location, it is nonetheless a self-contained place (cited in Relph 1976: 29). Once occupied by embodied sexuated beings, the indeterminate space of the ship becomes a sexually specific space that gives pattern to experience. Of course, I am not saying that the slavers' hold as a place is functioning in the same way as the domestic sphere. With Casey and Rich in mind, it is more fitting to describe the slavers' hold as a site of displacement. The slavers' hold is a 'place' outside or distinguished from the original home - place. It engenders certain histories, experiences and values, which bound and united those who experienced the Middle Passage towards a common destiny, and linked them to later generations who shared a common history of the Middle Passage. This is not to say that different kinds of identities (sexual, cultural, religious and so on) ceased or were not in the process of being produced.

In their work on the evolution of African-American cultures, anthropologists Sidney W Mintz and Richard Price (1976) addressed the importance of the bond forged among "shipmates" to the social organisation and ongoing social relations in the diasporic



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context. It was often said that 'so strong were the bonds between shipmates that sexual intercourse between them [...], was considered incestuous' (J. Kelly, cited in Mintz and Price 1976: 43). They argue that even in such a depersonalised space as the slavers' hold, identity did not cease, rather, this experience set the term for New World social relations. Mintz and Price believe that 'the development of these social bonds, even before Africans had set foot in the New World, already announced the birth of new societies based on new kinds of principle' (ibid: 44).

If Mintz and Price are right, the ship as a place 'serves to implace [us], to anchor and orient [us] finally becoming an integral part of [our] identity' (Casey 1993: 23). Against Spillers' account, the ship as a site of displacement is at the same time a site for the re-establishment of kinship structures and social bonds that traverse the event of the Middle Passage. In 'Place Intervals' Irigaray (1984) posits that, as long as a place is occupied by being, it is from the beginning always sexually differentiated. According to Moira Gatens, the *situated* subject is therefore 'always a *sexed* subject' (Gatens 1996: 9). From Spillers' account, it would appear that the captors were aware of sexual difference and used it to mark and separate the sexes from each other. However, as we have seen, Spillers argues that this 'application of gender rule' in the spatial organisation of the slavers' hold is premised on the commodification of the captives. According to Spillers, this economic imperative does not constitute a site of domesticity and therefore gendering cannot take place.

### *Articulating Gender Difference*

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What are the assumptions that underpin Spillers' ungendering proposal in the diaspora? There appears to be confusion. On the one hand she wants to contest the position she ascribes to Anglo-American feminism for conflating gender identity with biology. Spillers argues here that African-American gender identity cannot be thought in terms of shared biology. On the other hand, Spillers *also* wants to argue that gender identity is constituted in the domestic, in the symbolic realm of juridical discourse. This second claim constructs the domestic in a 'purely' cultural manner, outside of the experience of being a body. However, this decoupling of the body from its discursive and juridical coding is curious given that Spillers makes such a powerful case elsewhere for the ways in which the captives flesh was maimed, put to work, re-named and transformed into a 'laboratory prose'. In other words, Spillers at one point (namely, when she argues against object relations feminism) wants to deny the significance of the sexed body, only to require it absolutely elsewhere (when she tries to account for the violence that turned flesh into body and the gendering of the slavers' hold).

Even if we agree with cross-cultural accounts that self-identity is not necessarily conceived through physical embodiment, but established through social relations, (Moore 1994, Oyewumi 1997), the body as lived is always at work in the transmission and transformation of socio-political and historical practices. As Moira Gatens puts it, 'Identical social 'training', attitudes or, [...] conditioning acquire different significances when applied to male and female subjects' (1996: 9). In this way, the biological fact of femaleness (menstruation and potential for pregnancy), and the historical and cultural



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discourses, combine to constitute the subject. The body is not simply a physical entity, but one coded through and affected by networks of power relations. Therefore, we cannot understand 'the domestic' unless we acknowledge how the lived body constructs and is constructed by it. Moreover, negotiations between the public and private are thoroughly cultural and historical in nature. Several writers have suggested that the division between the public and the domestic sphere as gender constituting was only marked out as such from the seventeenth to early nineteenth century with the opposition of sexual spheres and the growing distinction between the private world of domesticity and the public world of work. The public/private distinction is not a universal one, and even in nineteenth century Europe, contemporary studies suggest that the boundaries between public and private were blurred. Therefore, Spillers cannot legitimately take these divisions as given, and give it such structuring importance in her account of the "domestic economy" of the slave ship.

In making this claim, Spillers thus denies other contributory factors in the constitution of subjectivity such as the performance of specific activities. For if it were the case that we learn to be women only in the domestic arena, many of us would not have experienced the sexual disparity we feel. As well as identity-formation in the domestic sphere, we also learn through the collective actions of others and the kind of activities performed by people around us. A slave child learns about her gender identity not only in the slave community, but, through the actions and reactions of others around her (White 1985, Bush 1990). Numerous examples abound in slave literature that suggest that young girls and boys pass into adulthood by learning to be aware of what it is to be sexed subjects, by

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learning the different uses for which their bodies will be utilised. This is especially the case in situations where very young girls fall prey to the roving eyes of both white masters and black male slaves. As bell hooks writes, 'The female slave lived in constant awareness of her sexual vulnerability and in perpetual fear that any male, white or black, might single her out to assault and victimize' (hooks 1982). This no doubt contributes to how she sees and orients herself in space. As Merleau-Ponty would say, identity is therefore both intersubjective and a "pre-personal tradition". With this in mind, I suggest that what took place aboard the slave ship is a conditioning of bodies; it is at the same time a site for the *materialisation of* gender differentiation. Despite the juridical exclusion of black women from the traditional symbolic order, the dehumanising condition of the ship and the oceanic suspension, captive women, still experienced themselves within a cultural code grounded *in* and informed by a physical reality which cannot sustain the discursive or legal code governing slave society.

Spillers' psychoanalytic reading of African-American women's loss of gender distinction concludes in modernist fashion with her advocacy of an emancipatory new project.

This problematizing of gender places [the black woman] [...] out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject. Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to "name"), which her culture imposes in



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blindness, "Sapphire" might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment. (Spillers 1987: 80)

Here, Spillers is calling for African American women to create a new symbolic - apart from both the traditional symbolic *and* from white female American gender construction. Although Spillers' seeks 'to recast the Lacanian symbolic in the terms of cultural domination' (Abel 1990: 187), she remains within the Lacanian frame: accepting the notion of a subject constituted within the symbolic order as *lack*. This framework is therefore grounded within a fundamentally negative ontology. The alternative framework she proposes is that of a monstrous, self-naming black female symbolic that empowers women to a more autonomous future. Unlike the 'stability which ensures a cohesive, unified speaking subject' (Grosz 1990: 152) in the Lacanian symbolic, Spillers finally takes the symbolic to be mutable; a mythopoetic grammar that must be re-worked. However, in contrast to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh, this re-working is grammatical, explicit and futural, rather than invisible, implicit and continually taking place.

Given that Spillers' aim is to distance herself from the classic Lacanian position, it is difficult to assess whether the problem with this modernist project lies with psychoanalysis *per se* or merely with Spillers' adaptation of it. What is clear is that by shifting the struggle against white male domination to some future moment and within the terms of the symbolic, Spillers comes dangerously close to reproducing the very modes of power she contests within the structure of her theorisation. Just as in classic

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Lacanian psychoanalysis, the symbolic displaces questions of agency away from human action and onto a mythopoetic structuring ground, so too does Spillers' account shift black women's capacity for self-empowerment onto to some futural (and henceforth deferred) moment. The fact that Spillers cannot mark out this project of self-naming in substantive terms (indeed leaving its announcement until right at the end of the text), suggests that the project in fact lacks substance. Perhaps more dangerously still, Spillers' account of the symbolic in historical terms imposes a retrospective attenuation of agency onto African-American women. Who is to say that black women since slavery have not engaged in just the sort of monstrous, autonomous projects of self-naming that Spillers calls for? Since when did being called "Brown Sugar" or "Sapphire" condemn a woman to thinking of or naming herself in such terms? Spillers makes the massive assumption that black women recognise themselves in these names. In order for any name to have any effect, there has to be, at the least, a partial recognition of that name. Given the logic of Spillers' argument, I would suggest that recognition of these names occurs only through practice and entry into the symbolic. However, this does not offer an explanation of why some black people recognise themselves in these names and reproduce their logic and others simply do not. By privileging the symbolic order, Spillers is unable to address this dialectic between recognition and refusal and therefore, how the 'logic of practice' (Bourdieu 1990) intertwines with relations of power to generate action and change, and at the same, its reproduction. This is not to deny the power of naming but to recognise that the power to reject or not recognise the name maybe at hand as black women engage in the process of naming and renaming themselves.



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In my view, this is where a phenomenological account has purchase against Spillers' psychoanalytic framework. Instead of displacing agency onto the external figure of the symbolic (mutable or not), phenomenology stresses the participation agents have in their own cultural horizons. Within the terms of phenomenology (especially that of Merleau-Ponty), the agent's identity is not constituted out of an originary lack, but emerges out of a cultural and historical capacity that is incessantly re-born according to the expressions and responses made within its terms. This is not to position black women as capable of changing their world absolutely and at every moment - a freedom as ultimate at this makes no sense. What it does suggest however is that the cultural horizon shifts according to modes of expression that occur on its behalf. There is therefore no need to launch a theoretical emancipatory project of the liberation that is "to come"; the work of subjectivity, as encountered in the first chapter, is one of active-passive engagement. Given this situation, agents can be created by the symbolic order, and at the same, construct alternatives that *challenge* that order. Phenomenology thus teaches us to look for those moments when transcendence of socio-cultural limitations has changed the paradigms of expression themselves. This might be through a project of a secret history or the uncovering of a sub-cultural space that empowered women to reach beyond the limits of their world.<sup>4</sup> I suggest therefore that a phenomenological framework offers a way of thinking about agency that is less absolutist than psychoanalysis. Rather than a symbolic that even in its mutable form ultimately denies self-directing behaviour, phenomenology demonstrates how historical and cultural horizons are forever being disrupted through their re-working. The theorisation of place given in the first chapter

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<sup>4</sup> I take this up in my discussion of women in Jamaican dancehall culture in chapter four.

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therefore shows how retentive trace structures of embodied gesture were never totally erased by the Middle Passage. Black diasporic women were never completely dominated by an imposed symbolic. Furthermore black diasporic women have little use of a project of self-naming that cannot flesh itself out in any detail.

At this point, I think it is worthwhile to show how empowerment and processes of self-naming have always been possible (and to give examples of its enactment). In this way, we can show how the flows of power and agency are fundamentally *ambiguous* - and exploitable by those who understand that resistance is always a possibility.

### **A Critique of the flesh/body Distinction**

Let us return to Spillers' flesh/body distinction. 'Flesh' refers to a memory of an originary African cultural practice. The 'body', in contrast, is formed within the space of the ship. The ship functions as another origin - a strange, uncanny home that can only be constituted on the basis of what I have characterised as a questionable notion of the original (a home of fixity, 'grammar' and set gender rules). The ship is the site of discipline and the work of power on the African flesh - turning flesh into body. Spillers constructs these two foundational grammars as effectively separate; only occasionally brought together, as a syntax and a hiatus that resist each other. I contend that this hard and fast distinction between flesh and the body cannot be sustained because they are in fact mutually constitutive aspects of each other. As Gilroy argues, we cannot understand the "Black Atlantic" merely on the basis of an encounter with western modernity, as if



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that periodisation was in some sense external. Any theorisation of the black diaspora must recognise that something like Spillers' flesh/body distinction is always at work. Such a reading favours an understanding of how moments of subjective transformation and disciplinary practices co-exist with "flesh" and "body". In this way, we can rethink black diasporic identity as that which is constituted out of an intense dialogic engagement with both the imaginary or mythic African "home" and the New World 'home' that is always in the process of becoming, of being named and violated.

Contrary to Spillers' claim, the 'hegemonic will' did not simply inscribe itself on a passive *tabula rasa*. In reality, the distinction she sets up between flesh and body was complicated by endless struggles over contested spheres of power. As Gilroy makes clear, the historical encounter between Africans and Europeans must be seen as a 'confrontation between two opposed, yet interdependent cultural and ideological systems and their attendant concepts of reason, history property and kinship' (1993: 219). This may seem an obvious point to make, but because Spillers privileges what was done *to* the body, she is unable to bring the 'body' and the 'flesh' together in a manner which stresses mutuality without privileging one over the other. Significantly, she is unable to historicise the flesh in the way she does the body. For Spillers, the flesh is the site at which African history is arrested or terminated, and the inscribed body is the surface for a new metaphysics of history or origin that 'began as the sea began'. Of course, there are problems with such a position. First, the claim for a desecrated flesh relies on a notion of an unmediated, ahistorical, pristine African past where gender identity was codified. Paradoxically, the psychoanalytic framework she adopts *also* invokes the "flesh" as "pre-

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gender" even if it does not identify, a pre-oedipal moment before gender is acquired. If the original place of "home" (Africa), was *gendered* than it, too, belong in history, and has a past. This would involve changing its function within Spillers organising frame. Second, the flesh/body distinction rests on a repressive hypothesis which assumes a 'hidden' inviolable, pre-discursive moment that occasionally interrupts the symbolic in moments of crisis in order to offer a transformative potentiality. Third, she assumes that the Middle Passage was so traumatic that enslaved Africans were completely expunged of their cultural memories. Moreover, she accepts the absolute, incontestable power of the enslavers. The assumption above ultimately leads to a rejection of the centrality of memory and traditions in the constitution of subjectivity, even in limit conditions.

In his essay, 'The Problem of Passivity: Sleep, the Unconscious, Memory' (1963), Merleau-Ponty argues that the problem with a psychoanalytic inspired account is that it is *disembodied*. A disembodied theorisation, he suggests, leads to a purely conceptual account of memory; memory as "Representation" (or consciousness). Thinking memory in terms of representation leads to a dilemma. Memory is conceptualised as either a work of *conservation* or *construction*. In terms of conservation, memory is conceived of as the set of fixed objects that reside in consciousness and as such becomes fundamental to the ego. The ego is always concerned to preserve its identity through maintaining the essence of the objects of memory. In the case of conservation, the self has a passive relationship to memory; the ego stands guard over a memory that comes prior to any of its acts. It is this process that is passively returned to in re-memoration. In terms of construction, memory is always reworked through the process of recollection. Memory is constructed



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as an active agency. For Merleau-Ponty, the problem with this second account is that some form of memory or object must be assumed. That is, in order to provide a satisfactory account of memory as construction, one is forced to assume something like conservation. Thus Merleau-Ponty contends that in the work of memory, conservation and construction require each other. For Merleau-Ponty, the interplay between active forgetting and remembrance involves the body. He writes:

We might begin by viewing the present as a certain unique position of the index of being-in-the-world, and our relations with the present when the present slips into the past, like our relations with our surroundings, might be attributed to a postural schema which unfolds and shapes a series of positions and temporal possibilities, so that the body could be regarded as that which answers each time to the question "Where am I and what time is it? Then there would be no question of any alternative between conservation and construction; memory would not then be the opposite of forgetfulness. (1963: 50).

To account for memory, therefore, requires that the embodied situation (the demand to determine the present index of bodily being-in-the-world in the above quotation), is addressed. That is, we can think of the constructive, active part of memory as the need to think the conditions of the present. And secondly, we can think of the conservative aspect as the conditions that enabled the present to be given as present. 'True memory',

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Merleau-Ponty writes, 'is to be found at the intersection of the two, at the moment where memory forgotten and kept by forgetfulness returns' (ibid: 51). In Spillers' account it is possible to unearth a purely conservative account, expressed in negative terms. That is, the experience of the Middle Passage destroyed what might have been conserved. It is important not to completely homogenise Spillers's thematisation however, for on occasions she alludes to a powerful model that resists expropriation. For example, this occurs when she hints at the familial and kinship patterns fostered under slavery. She writes that although kinship structures were 'invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations' of the slave system, they however, remain 'one of the supreme social achievements of African-Americans under conditions of enslavement' (1987: 74). Spillers, however, is unable to pursue adequately this model of a 'Black Family' that resisted the codes of slavery because her analysis privileges a legal and social discourse that denies black humanity.

In contrast, Gilroy's account of the black diaspora emphasises the importance of a reworked memory of Africa and slavery in the black diasporic imagination. From this position, we can surmise that it is precisely the context of their being-in-the-world, the situatedness of the ship, plantation life and post-emancipation experience that determines the form that transformation and this working through of memory takes. As Gilroy sees it, the experience of the ship and the elemental suspension at sea does not represent an absolute loss of history or memory, rather it generates new forms of history and memory. Gilroy, alongside Merleau-Ponty, shows that memory is therefore neither forgetting nor remembering, active or passive. Nor does it involve an ontological contest between the



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disaggregated flesh and the inscribed body. Instead, memory involves a *dialogic* relation - a preservatory forgetfulness, that is not absolute. Memory is preserved in its forgetting due to its trace being reworked. These traces are kept alive through cultural forms - religion, song, story-telling, elemental patterns of movement. This way of thinking about memory and the elemental suspension at sea permit an analysis of the black diaspora as one structured by, and experienced through, difference. This offers a transformative difference of memory's constructive dramatisation within a new scene. I shall develop this theorisation of memory in the next chapter.

By distinguishing flesh from body, Spillers closes off any argument that African cultural memory survived not only the vicissitudes of the Middle Passage but also the horrendous plight of the New World. In contrast, I would argue that it is the presence of such memories (that are present as traces) which forces both a recall of the world left behind and simultaneously a 'reading' and 'rereading' of the new situation. It is only in this way that the slaves could begin to make sense of their plight. At least for the first generation of slaves, the codes of the master might have set limits on their activities; it did not however determine the content of their activities (Sobel 1987, Thompson 1984). They brought with them into their new situation meaningful aspects of their culture which enabled them to create what Gilroy has called a 'counter culture of modernity'. Thus flesh and body are, against Spillers, interwoven within 'a common fabric of memory and inspiration' (Spillers 1987: 75). Indeed, many writers documenting the black diasporic experience have suggested that it is the presence of the interweaving of the flesh and body that created the need to fight, to eliminate and contest the violence and injustice of the

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present (Stuckey 1987). Stuart Hall has noted that Africa was present everywhere in the New World. He writes:

[...] Africa was, in fact present everywhere: in the everyday life and customs of the slave quarters, in the languages and patois of the plantations, in names and words, often disconnected from their taxonomies, in the secret syntactical structures through which other languages were spoken, in the stories and tales told to children, in religious practices and beliefs, in the spiritual life, the arts, crafts, music and rhythms of slave and post-emancipation society [...]. It is the secret code with which every Western text was 're-read'. It is the ground-bass of every rhythm and bodily movement. This was - is - the 'Africa' that 'is alive and well in the diaspora'. (1990: 230)

Thus, the continued presence of the 'fleshed body' or the forgotten-yet-retained memory of Africa provided diasporic black people the opportunity to act. 'Action', according to Lewis Gordon, is 'itself a function of subjective and intersubjective encounter' (1995: 50); action led to resistance and the creation of new cultural idioms rooted in a restless desire for freedom, citizenship and autonomy. Remembrance (whether of slavery or Africa) thus became the way resistance was figured. As James Baldwin (1962) remarked, it is the presence of the past in the present that made the life of the slaves coherent and bearable. The present becomes a (re)memoration of the past, where both African history and the New World future are intricately woven in a tapestry of contradiction. This intersection



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of two worlds was not only a meeting ground of Europe and Africa. It was also where, in the space of the ship, different African cultures (sometimes for the first time) came together and communicated to each other their anguish, anxieties and, most importantly, what they should and would become together. We can say that from the horrors of the slave ship, transformation, (re)adjustment, and negotiation was already underway, an 'aquatic genesis' of new grammar or ways of being. The captives were already engaging in creating the terms of New World cultures and identities.

Following Gilroy then, the ship, as a bridge connecting several geographical and cultural contexts, acts against any easy return to the comfort of an original home. For the 'original' home, as suggested in Gilroy's citation of Nietzsche, can never be returned to unproblematically. Returning to the original moment is rendered impossible. Therefore when a return does take place, the original home is always experienced differently because of the transformations of time. Through the work of the body's emplacement, the 'original' home itself is constructed differently. This attention to history does not remain locked in the past: imagining the present home in the work of transformation involves re-imagining and reconstructing the 'original home' itself. Hence, in Merleau-Ponty's account of transformative embodied memory, the origin can only be present as a trace. The imagination of the past involves its difference; what is conserved does not stay the same. Thus a feeling of belonging to a place across time always has to be conceptualised imaginatively (Morrison 1990, Harris 1970). It is here that the value of Gilroy's emphasis on the ship as an imaginative vessel can compliment Spillers' exaggerated account of a disrupted origin. For Gilroy, the ship is the pre-eminent site of a profound

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connection to an African past, but it is also within the flow of suspension that connection is disrupted into webs of interchanging differences. *The ship does not mark a loss of one history, but the beginning of many histories.* Thus, once we begin to think about the ship as a site for the transfiguration of memory and the historical, the absolutism of origins and objectification governing Spillers' account is challenged and replaced by Gilroy's focus on the various quest for subjective agency by diasporic black men.

It is now possible to understand that it is only on the basis of decorporealisation that Spillers can claim that the ship is in effect not a place, and is not a site of significance or gender signification. At the core of Spillers' attempts to impose a distinction between flesh and the body is the very attempt to decouple biology from the realm of culture and discourse. The 'flesh' tries to operate in a sort of pre-discursive realm. The 'flesh' is therefore distinguished from the 'body', which is taken to lie within discursive realm. By collapsing or intertwining this distinction I am able to claim that the lived bodies on the slave ships were then always at work in transforming what was given as a set of disparate histories, cultures, customs and languages, binding them together in anticipation of the new world experience.

### **Beyond Gilroy & Spillers**

So far, Gilroy and Spillers have been placed in a productive dialogue with each other, however, the core criticism that must be levelled at both their accounts is the deep-level *Eurocentrism* which affects their thought and is unregistered within it. By way of conclusion, I shall articulate pointers that suggest ways beyond and outside of their shared



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historiological horizons.

It is clear that both Spillers and Gilroy tell their stories from a European perspective. This is evident in the way that the periodisation involved in both accounts starts from the moment of the slave trade. Whilst this is important, it has the inevitable consequence that that which is *prior* to or *outside* or parallel to this moment is left undertheorised and marginalised in terms of the historical frame imposed upon the subject matter. The danger of any historiological periodisation is that any historical dynamic outside the frame is underplayed and undermined, unless specific attention is placed back upon it from within the work. Unfortunately, both Gilroy and Spillers are not so cautious as to attend to that which lies outside their frame of reference. The outcome is an account of African history prior to the Middle Passage that is naïve, essentialist and devoid of any attention to internal difference. In other words, both accounts succumb, against the wishes of their respective authors, to the very Eurocentrism they are in part struggling against.

Worse still, this unconscious Eurocentric periodisation is placed alongside a *geographic* Eurocentrism. The slave trade and its ramifications are told from the perspective of European and North American cartography. For Spillers, the black diasporic identity is constituted through an exclusion from European symbolic realm. In Gilroy's case, the Black Atlantic refers to the concealed constitutive other of European modernity. What Gilroy is unconscious of is the possibility of the history of the African slave trade told from *another* perspective other than that of one conditioned by the starting point of

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European modernity. It never occurs to Gilroy (or to Spillers for that matter) to imagine that there is a history of the slave trade told from the perspective of the African continent. This omission, according to Laura Chrisman, 'makes totalising claims for itself, so that the identity and experience of New World slave-descended black people is somehow, by default, seen to contain or represent all modern black experience' (1997: 58). No one will want to deny that slavery is as much a part of the history of Africa and Europe. However, its singular focus in Gilroy and Spillers' text, has the effect of marginalising the centrality of colonialism and other constitutive factors in the formation of black diasporic identity.

Implicit within Gilroy's argument is the assumption that hybridity and discontinuity are "gifts" bestowed upon Africans only through their encounter with Europe. This is especially evident in his use of terms such as "pre-slave history", "anti-modernity", "pre-modern", "outside modernity" throughout the text - a curiously uncritical (and historically totally inappropriate) term. If Gilroy wants to impute a level of transformativity and discontinuity to African cultures before slavery, he certainly does not spell it out or give it any prominence. This lack of attention is surely telling. Gilroy's privileging of slave trade discontinuity entails that he ends up repeating the very same afrocentrist theme he is keen to criticise: the reification of a pure and untainted vision of Africa prior to European contact. This view, implicit or not, must be contested. As the Beninois philosopher, Paulin J Hountondji, has written, in the context of Africa "discontinuities", "revolutions", "pluralism" or what James Snead (1984) calls the "cut" are not in the first instance always externally generated. They are in fact first generated from *within*. Hountondji suggests that it is important to recognise that



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pluralism does not come from any society from outside but is inherent in every society. The alleged acculturation, the alleged 'encounter' of African civilization with European civilization, is really just another mutation produced from within African civilization, the successor to many earlier ones about which our knowledge is very incomplete, and, no doubt, the precursor of many future mutations, which may be more radical still. The decisive encounter is not between Africa as a whole and Europe as a whole: it is the continuing encounter between Africa and itself. (1976: 165)

The history of the slave trade told from the perspective of a continent's ongoing unfolding across time would re-position the Eurocentrism that plagues Spillers and Gilroy within a different *Afrocentrism* - far from essentialist - attending to specific historical dynamics between cultures and classes on African soil. Perhaps the blindspot of grand historical narratives (like that of Spillers and Gilroy) is that of geography. Indeed, the relation between a metaphysics grounded in geography and a marine ontology is deeply ambiguous in Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*. At the superficial level, it is clear that he wants to substitute an interstitial account of black identity floating upon the sea through innumerable journeys for one grounded in any particular territory. The question is whether he succeeds in this project or whether he merely gestures towards it. With the appropriate quotes from Nietzsche, it is clear that Gilroy wants to leave the soil behind in

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his quest for anti-anti-essentialism. I would contend however that he fails manifestly to outline or commit his thought to an aquatic ontology. The structurations of identity emerging from his text are much more *juxtapositional* than that. Rather than an aqueous *between*, Gilroy ends up with a between that is merely between one land and the next - from an ontological point of view *extrinsic* difference rather than *intrinsic* difference. The Black Atlantic turns out to be a new kind of territory rather than a suspension of the territorial itself. This juxtaposition is revealed in the way his black intellectuals roll over the ocean to play the European game. Rather than a history that is neither American nor European, Wright, DuBois and company end up being the counter-cultural figures of European modernity, the shadows within its territory rather than the water forever beyond its shores. Absent from Gilroy's account are the *other* sources and *other* connections that such figures made within history. Martin Luther King's Hegelianism is stated, but Gandhi's influence on his theories of non-violent action is repressed. As Dayan comments, 'It should give readers pause that Gilroy's "reconstructive" project mentions Mannoni but not Cesaire, Lacan but not Fanon' (1996: 11). It would appear that cultural, intellectual exchange and hybridity is ironically constructed in purely European terms. The only borrowing or hybridity discussed within the text is a European hybridity, as if hybridity is exclusively the product of an encounter between Europe and Africa. The notion of a hybridity beyond or before this (of the sort Hountondji mentions) is completely missing from his thought.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A suitable beginning for this project of a non-Eurocentric theorisation of black diasporic experience would be to return to the sea in a non-juxtapositional sense, that is, not just between two bits of land but as the aqueous condition of being, a fluid mechanics suggesting an identity forever beyond the land and the threat of territorial recaptures like that of a refigured European modernity.



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A similar sort of underlying Eurocentric error infects Spillers' text. A way into this Eurocentrism is achieved by focusing on the emphasis she places upon *grammar* in *Mama's Baby*. As a parallel to Gilroy's unconscious return to the land and to extrinsic difference, Spillers' text is motivated by the desire to return to the structure of an "African grammar" as the focus of an unsubstantiated redemptive project. In arguing for a gendered identity that slavery temporally denied, Spillers also assumes that gender signification was an organising principle in Africa pre-European slavery. Although Spillers attempts to extricate culture from biology, in her insistence on the loss of gender, she imports biology back into her account. Several anthropologists have argued that "gender", as an organising principle in Western society, is based on the link made between physical embodiment as an expression of an essential identity. They have argued that in non-western cultures, personhood is not necessarily established through biology, but through their positioning in social relations and the performance of appropriate activities (Moore 1994, Strathern 1998). In her recent book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender discourse* (1997), Oyeronke Oyewumi points out that prior to colonisation among the Yorubas of Nigeria, the body was not the 'basis of social roles, inclusions, or exclusions' (1997: x). Nor was social thought and identity constituted around biology. Instead, the social organisation was defined in terms of 'seniority, which was based on chronological age' (ibid: 14). For this reason, Oyewumi posits the absence of gender categories. In light of this account, Spillers' theory of a gender identity eroded by slavery appears as a retrogressive projection of an Anglo-European paradigm upon that which it strives to understand. In

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this case, the notion of an original gender structuration that has been violated starts to betray its origins within a specific cultural frame and specific socio-political needs.

In summary, I contend that, against Spillers' argument, black female identity is always being reworked and is always in the process of *becoming*. Spillers represses the way in which embodied difference is transformed across time and in the space of the Middle Passage. A central concern of this chapter has been to rethink the ship and the elemental suspension at sea and their position within black diasporic discourse. I have begun to fabricate an antiphonal structure - a political and imaginative space conditioning black Atlantic diasporic experience that is neither Eurocentric or Afrocentric (in the conventional meaning of the words). I shall return to antiphony in the next chapter. The suspension of the sea disrupts a fixed identity, history and memory (and their hybridisation through extrinsic difference) in favour of a transformative dialogue, where traces of the past occur both in the context of the journey by ship and in the context of a conversation with the diasporic "home". I have done this by combining what I take to be the important insights of Spillers – her attention to the historical specificity of painful journeys - minus the absolutism of her account, together with the cultural synthesis of Gilroy, minus his de-economised relativism. Between activity and passivity, joy and pain, I have begun to suggest an antiphony of the active-passive and a pain that is expressible as joy. These themes will return throughout the rest of this thesis.



### Chapter 3: Diasporic Memory As Rhythmic-Gestural Patterning

How can one understand such a torture and how tolerate the pain of these dislocations? Why the mercilessness of these bars and this detailed destruction of the body proper? Why this frantic return to the scattered limbs? Does the spectre of death lurk in dance? [...]. Memory, however, preserves the hard odours of embrocations and restores the fabulous antiquity of gymnastics. From what mists of time does this absence return to us? (Michel Serres 1995: 39)

In the last chapter, I argued that the black diaspora is dialogic in form. Black identity is neither faithful to its origins nor absolutely deracinated. Instead, it occupies a plural middle ground between retention and recreation. This antiphonal existence has been the resource for the transmission of sedimented cultural memories and what in another context David Hecht and Timothy Maliqalim Simone have called a 'workable sense of plurality' (1994: 36). Although the responses the body has to new environments are not necessarily part of conscious awareness, they are materially present to the diasporic subject through what Toni Morrison has called "rememory"<sup>1</sup>: through bodily traces and practices. As will be evident throughout the argument, I want to contest a "biogenetic" explanation for diasporic retention in the strongest terms as necessitating a physically

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<sup>1</sup> By rememory, I am following Morrison's usage in her novel *Beloved*. She describes rememory as an event or action that is remembered by a subject or community who were not necessarily involved in the original act, but for whom the act continues to have a profound effect on their lives. As Seth, talking to her daughter Denver states: 'Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else' (1987: 36).

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reductivist account of the body. Genetics speaks of “flesh and blood”, whilst the account offered here will stress the irreducibility of *embodiment*. The traces of movement, experience, tradition and identity that are re-patterned in each new present of the diaspora will be explained in terms of an assemblage of antiphonal habit-memories, rather than DNA.

Of course, this existential account is itself a story of origins, their relentless formation and deformation, and as such it is *genetic* - an existential genetics rather than a purely biological genetics. This existential genetics is generated principally by the body's enigmatic gift of memory and the rhythm of existence. The rhythm of existence is a movement between freedom and constraint, stasis and change, biology and culture. And as Monika M Langer, writes,

That movement ceaselessly carries anonymous biological existence forward into personal existence in a cultural world and conversely, allows the personal and the cultural to become sedimented in general, anonymous structures. (1989: 34)

I suggest that it is the tangible presence of these existential sediments that occasions the perpetual ‘frantic return to the scattered limbs’ (Serres 1995: 39), to unknown memories of time when time was a restlessness that recalled the absence lurking in the pulsating pelvis. This mode of time recalls the moments when living was uneasy and the living struggled to dance and (re)write new narratives of a futural yearning as they filled the



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gaps (sometimes "In a Silent Way" - Miles Davis). Here, we arrive at an absence that returns as the body moves gracefully ungraced across the present to reveal new rhythmic-gestural patternings that open up possibilities for the emergence of future desires. Occurrences or events from the past actualised in the moment constitute these desires. Again and again, the enigma of the body's memory and its capacity for remembrance.

But this is too much poetry, and much too soon. We must ask first: what is diasporic memory? How is it a form of creative existence? How is it figured or expressed? What is the nature of the expression? Can this expression of memory be understood as lying within the faculty of cognition, or is it beyond psychology? Is diasporic memory the past presented as an object of knowledge or representation? Is memory first and foremost of the individual, or does it involve a dynamic negotiation between collective horizons and embodied agents? How can memory explain the culture of perpetual innovation, creativity and transformation prevalent across the black diaspora?

This chapter aims to explore this nexus of questions in three ways. First, I argue that memory cannot be theorised purely in terms of the language of cognition or reflective consciousness. I do so by proposing a theory of memory that privileges the role of embodiment, rather than the mind. Second, I begin to address the question of body memory by introducing the idea of *rhythmic-gestural patterning* as a way of understanding the work of memory in the black diaspora. Third, I focus on how rhythmic-gestural patterning expresses both creative and historical imperatives. I do this by positing the notion of a formal structure that ensures the vital creativity of the black

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diaspora. At the end, I introduce the main theme of the following chapter by arguing that this formal structure is always different in each situation of expression - according to the pragmatics of survival.

#### **The Limits of Memory as Cognition**

The argument in this chapter is that memory, within a diasporic context and as a form of expression, lies both prior to *and within* a cognitive or representational epistemological paradigm. I do not wish to deny that diasporic memory, through various representational devices or what Paul Connerton (1989) refers to as the *inscribing practice* (oral or written testimonies, objects such as old photographs and souvenirs), may indeed at times involve objects of personal or collective folk-historical knowledge. Rather, my focus here will be to explore aspects of diasporic re-memorations that are *not* subject to conscious retrieval or easily understood in terms of representation. The diasporic memory I want to explore here is not the set of images, stories, objects of knowledge or narrative arabesques that can be drawn upon through reflection. Instead, the kind of memory under discussion conserves the past as bodily trace, sedimented habit, cultural patterning, or as the ghost of a rhythm buried deep within the body. This form of memory is not passively transmitted within and across generations; rather a dynamic relationship emerges wherein the past constitutes and shapes the present by way of present needs and desires. Therefore, the past, as Merleau-Ponty writes, can be ‘wholly active and wholly passive’ (1962: 428) at one and the same time. For example, phenomena such as styles of walking, mannerisms, dances, religious rituals, facial expressions and glances, social manners, touch and



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conventional gestures such as handshakes or flicks of the eyelid are often involuntary, 'beyond the grasp of consciousness' (Bourdieu 1977: 94) – at the same time as being available for conscious stylisation. The memory being referred to here is often called 'tacit' knowledge - a form of largely non-reflective comprehension. The theory of tacit knowledge or habit-memory implies that our embeddness within a structure is not always open to self-reflection. As Bourdieu writes, 'It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know' (1990: 69).

It is in this way that we can begin to understand the prevalence of certain transcultural expressive phenomena, such as the habit of "Cut-Eye" and "Suck-Teeth" amongst diasporic black people and continental Africans (Rickford and Rickford 1976). Such cross-cultural habits (though modified) indicate the extent to which African traits have survived in the diaspora. These expressive traces constitute what Connerton has called *incorporating practice*:

a smile or a handshake or words spoken in the presence of someone we address, are all messages that a sender or senders impart by means of their own current bodily activity, the transmission occurring only during the time that their bodies are present to sustain that particular activity.  
(1989: 72)

In my view, it is such deeply embodied forms of collective remembrance that reveal diasporicity in its richest sense. For Elaine Scarry, these sedimentations are so powerful

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that they are 'less easily shed, than those disembodied forms [...] that exist in verbal habits or in thoughts' (1985: 109). While many of the languages of Western and Central Africa have been forgotten or mutated or undergone a process of incorporation, the movement and rhythms of diasporic body patterns retain elements of African embodied expression in a much stronger form than their linguistic counterparts<sup>2</sup>. Melville Herskovits writes that 'dance itself has in characteristic form carried over into the New World to a greater degree than almost any other trait of African culture' (1941: 76). African kinaesthetics, especially gestures from Kongo and Yoruba culture, reappear again and again in diasporic black cultures.

In *Four Moments of the Sun*, the Africanist art historian Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet write of the relationship between the gesture that accompanies the song *Stop in the Name of Love* by the Supremes and *telama*, a gesture found among the Kongo. During the performance of *Stop in the Name of Love*, the Supremes would place their 'left hand on hip, right hand or palm before the body' (1981: 175). The Kongos believed 'that placing the left hand on hip presses down all evil, while the extended right hand acts to "vibrate" the future in a positive manner. Important women used this pose at dawn to "vibrate positively" the future of town warriors (ibid: 172). Thompson and Cornet write that that the Supremes were '[...] striking the very pose Kongo elders used to stop misbehaviour at a traditional dance' (ibid: 175). This retention shows that the political and cultural identity of the body cannot be easily changed in the same way as verbal forms of expression.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course there is ample evidence to suggest many black dialects still have a significant phonological and



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From this perspective, body memory can also be thought of in terms of an horizon or framework of identity in the present - the very locus of identity and survival. As David Michael Levin writes, 'The body is a living symbol of tradition because it knows *instinctively* that it must embrace creative metamorphosis in order to survive' (1985: 173). As I will argue shortly, diasporic memory itself is a sort of open possibility - an invitation to participation, (inter)involvement and emergence. In general, we cannot help but be surrounded by memory - it is the warp and woof of our being in the present, the invisible ether that is consumed through each breath. Alongside cognitive capture, memory-as-bodily-habit is fluid, presenting dynamic interpersonal opportunities for agents that respond to an ongoing situation without necessarily referring to it through words or textualisation.

Before going further, it is necessary to stress that the privileging of embodied memoration over other approaches to memory does not imply that those other approaches are insignificant; nor does it suggest that we discard hermeneutical analysis in favour of a purely somatic account. There is still a place for an interpretative account of body memory, so long as it does not fall into the semiotic trap that is currently fashionable among deconstructionists and psychoanalytically inspired theorists. In this respect, focus on body memory is a response to its relative neglect in much recent scholarly work. The trend has been to favour a personal or cognitive approach to memory, to the neglect of

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morphological continuities with the Niger-Congo family of languages (see Maureen Warner Lewis 1996)

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habit-memory (Connerton 1989). That habit-memory has received little attention<sup>3</sup> from theorists has to do with the fact that remembering is generally associated with a "mental act" or a "mental occurrence" (ibid: 23). The connection between memory and habit is perhaps not as obvious as other aspects of memory, especially in light of a background theoretical context of intellectualism<sup>4</sup> and hermeneutics. An intellectualist take on memory is, according to Mary Warnock, 'inadequate by itself to the concept of memory' (1976: 2). Memory, she argues, needs to be understood in terms of the organic intertwining of body and mind, psychology and physiology. She states, 'it is high time that we stopped talking as if there were mental entities, or mental events, on the one hand, and physical entities or events on the other [We need to] find a language which does not take such a dichotomy for granted' (ibid: 2).

Beyond memory as a merely personal or cognitive act open to hermeneutic or representational modes of transmission, I will argue that memory is embedded within a collective *ontological* structure of bodily being in the world. To remember or to memorise is to inhabit a cultural and historical horizon of possibility for action and emotion in the present:

To remember is not to bring into the focus of consciousness a self-subsistent picture of the past; it is to thrust deeply into the horizon of the

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<sup>3</sup> There has very recently been an interest in habit-memory amongst theorists influenced by the work of the late French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. There is a connection between this thought and Merleau-Ponty: both are strongly influenced by Henri Bergson, in particular his book *Matter and Memory* (1991).

<sup>4</sup>See distinction between Merleau-Ponty's idea of empiricism and intellectualism in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962).



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past and take apart step by step the interlocked perspectives until the experiences which it epitomizes are as if relived in their temporal setting. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 22)

Here, we have a dramatically active account of remembrance, a destructive re-enactment that loosens the ties of past experience to past situations so that the experience can be a resource for the present. So much more than a representation of the past in the present, memory in this sense refers to the unfolding of ritualised repetition, the process whereby linear time is disrupted and the past flows into the present. Memory is dynamic rather than passive, fluid rather than static; in alchemical terms it is more mercury than earth. This is because memory is a gathering of what Merleau-Ponty calls 'habit-body' and 'momentary body' (ibid: 254,82) - a combination of temporal layers that offsets the inertia of tradition against the potentiality of the moment. Again, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, memory is an index of the body's present being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty writes,

The part played by the body in memory is comprehensible only if memory is, not only the constituting consciousness of the past, but an effort to reopen time on the basis of the implications contained in the present, and if the body, as our permanent means of 'taking up attitudes' and thus constructing pseudo-presents, is the medium of our communication with time as well as with space. The body's function in remembering is that same function of projection which we have already met in starting to move: the body converts certain motor essence into

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vocal forms, spreads out the articulatory style of a word into phenomena, and arrays the former attitude, which is resumed, into the panorama of the past, projecting an intention to move into actual movement, because the body is a power of expression. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 181)

Through remembrance, time becomes allegorical: a story about the present existential situation recounted in a different way. Memory therefore operates through the subject's capacity to express and respond to its existential context. This is not to say that recall is essentially an act of individual volition. Instead, as encountered in the first chapter, new events, emotional states, shifts in location and actions in the present often trigger memory, invoking a past that is disguised from itself as it takes up another guise and another situation. The historian Lawrence W. Levine has argued that the resilience of Africanism in the diaspora is determined less by its 'ability to withstand change, which indeed may be a sign of stagnation not life, but by its ability to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation' (1978: 5). It is precisely because memory (individual or communal) is formed within the motivations of a new situation and new power relations that it is said to be selective, malleable and open to confusion, lapses and change; and neither fully active nor fully passive in terms of agency. As such, the individual or a community is able to imagine, configure and refigure the past differently, becoming an *expression* of present and future conditions, needs and desires. As Pierre Nora writes,



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Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent revolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived [...]. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present (1989: 8)

### Shifting Sites of Memory

The position I want to develop contrasts itself with the two accounts of the black diaspora encountered in the previous chapter. Beyond Gilroy's historico-cultural notion of the Black Atlantic - the Atlantic Ocean as an historical locus of cultural hybridisation and a primary element of the black diaspora - I will emphasise that just as memory is not frozen in time, the investment in *sites* of memory and history can also change. Reflection upon black diasporic experience must attune itself to the existential dynamics of memory being shifted, as new situations are privileged. For example, my adolescent memories of childhood may be located around the neighbourhood I have yet to leave; in later life this memory is itself reworked as the neighbourhood becomes part of a much larger cultural and cosmic context. Arguing for shifting sites of memory does not in any way deny the importance of the Atlantic Ocean or slavery in black diasporic identity and remembrance. It merely imposes the need to recognise how sites of memory and events (for example direct or indirect colonial rule, multiple migrations, gender relations, etc.) are grafted upon old sites and old events, complicating any privileged position ascribed to

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the Atlantic and slavery as *the* site and object of diasporic forms of remembrance. As B. Jewsiewicki and V.Y. Mudimbe argue, 'recollection is neither an account nor a list [...] but a meaningful configuration of selected, negotiated events around "sites of memory"' (1993: 10). Such places help to organise and legitimate collective and individual memory by connecting present experience to the past through a reworking. Often, the process of legitimisation is undertaken by critical history and theoretical reflections. As was argued in the previous chapter, what for Spillers was held to be the undifferentiated space of the slave ship was transformed into a place and given significance through the emplacement of African bodies. Through a critical reflection, the slave ship becomes a place of experience and memory, not just an anonymous, delimited space. The slavers' hold becomes a marker for subjectivities in process, reflection and movement. It is however never static; in time, other sites of memory present themselves, displace and co-exist with this apparently primal site. Places turn into palimpsests. This ensures that the question of black diasporic origins remains a complex one, open to interpretation by each generation of critics reflecting upon the place of their present. For Gilroy, as for the Afro-Caribbeanist Richard Price, 'slavery forms the single most important referent' (David Scott 1991:263) of black diasporic practice of remembrance. In contrast, contemporary Afro-centrics focus on Herskovits' work in the late 1920s where 'Africa [...] forms the single most important referent' (ibid: 263). Scott further argues that when we think about the origin or the 'first-time' of the black diaspora, it is always differentiated and invested with different meaning even as a unitary referent is invoked. He writes,



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For example, the "first-time" of Rastafarians in Jamaica [...], turns on the central figure of slavery; but it is likely to be inscribed with a different set of ideological investments, reflecting its own specific historical and political conditions. What would be at stake here is less whether we can measure the extent to which this diasporan community of Rastafarians retains an accurate memory of any verifiable preemancipation event than the ways in which this figure, slavery (and those figures metaphorically and metonymically connected to it), enables (or prevents) establishment of positions in a cultural and political field. (ibid: 278-279)

Black diasporic memory must therefore always be situated within the arena of a cultural and political *horizon* of possibility, as much as it is referred to in terms of an *object* for cultural critique. In the last chapter we saw how Gilroy settled upon the exceptional journeys of diasporic "race men" such as Richard Wright, W.E.B. DuBois, Frederick Douglas and the rest in order to weave a counter tradition of western modernity that, at the least, complicates conventional accounts. I want now to focus upon how these same hybridisations form part of a generalised and more anonymous background fabric of black diasporic experience that is available to black diasporic agents prior to reflective awareness. This manoeuvre away from the object of cultural critique and towards an existential analysis has important ramifications back upon the 'historical' itself. Most significantly, what is challenged is the allegedly foundational character of such events as slavery as the all-encompassing rupture of 'modernity' and the hub of black memory

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(Alasdair Pettinger 1994 and Joan Dayan 1998). Again, I am seeking to rupture the Eurocentricism that is the unconscious organising principle of both Spillers and Gilroy's texts. While an account of the individual journeys across the time and space of the black diaspora is important to an analysis of diasporic black experience, it is crucial that we integrate it within the wider context of the nameless expression of black agents displaced across the Atlantic.

The position being established here will also distinguish itself from the foundational thematics at work in Spillers' account. Against the primal trauma of the Middle Passage, through an existential analysis that focuses on lived experience and the transformative potential of the present moment, accounts of black diasporic memory can begin to become more nuanced and sensitive to multiple *lieux de mémoire*, different existential contexts and different political-economic imperatives. Beyond the obvious context of collective memories of slavery, we can take a particular cultural phenomena, such as the Cuban dance *rumba*, and begin to detail all the cultural, historical, political and economic factors that are woven together to constitute its existence as an opportunity for Cuban lived experience and transformative agency. In *Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba* (1995), Yvonne Daniel undertakes such a task. Beyond situating rumba within the history of slavery and white supremacy; she argues that it has to be thought in terms of the productive encounter between 'African heritage from Spain through Moorish contact and its African heritage from West and Central Africa' (Daniel 1995: 118). Daniel argues that the local context of the Cuban revolution in shaping rumba (and its appropriation by the State soon afterwards as a symbol of cultural



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nationalism), in opposition to its other history as a sub-cultural vehicle of expression for the disfranchised poor, have also to be considered. In Daniel's terms, all these different configurations are so thoroughly entwined that what constitutes rumba remains in process of becoming as it incorporates other forms such as 'break dance steps and the moon walk step associated with Michael Jackson and [the introduction] of acrobatic double and triple flips' (ibid: 9).

Between Gilroy and Spillers, this account of black diasporic memory as active-passive agency also challenges the prevalence of *inscriptive* modes of articulation. An existential-phenomenological account of memory attempts to dig beneath the discursive and textual layers of remembrance, demonstrating that memory is not written indelibly upon the skin. Rather, memory is more like chalk as it scratches itself across the surface of a blackboard; its powder leaving palimpsests that become part of the grain of the wood. Diasporic memory may in part be traumatic, and in that sense Toni Morrison's description in *Beloved* of the chokecherry tree scar read by Denver on Seth's back is an apt figuration of its status as an insidious trace of a collective wound. Indeed, the bullet track holes favoured in dancehall fashion are a symbol of the continued violence in the daily lives of many diasporic black people. Figures other than the inscriptive must however be brought into being if the primal scene of trauma is to be transfigured by the work of the present. In Morrison's novel itself, the other event that gestures towards transfiguration is the joyous affirmation of the skin that occurs in the clearing scene; acting as a temporary autonomous zone of a transformative scene of the remembrance of

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the flesh. In the clearing, an open space in the woods, Baby Suggs offered a redemptive sermon to the waiting community:

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. [...] And O my people they do not love your hands. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. [...] *You* got to love it. This is flesh I' talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and dance. (Morrison 1987: 88)

As with the general sway of this thesis, I shall be concerned in this chapter to show that the traumatic effects of past events (whether experienced directly or not) do not operate either as fixed givens or as determinative - even if they continue to have powerful effects on the psychic, material and social experience and attitude of black and white people. The traumas that are chalked into the present can become part of other movements, other desires and other futures, rather than being merely lines that dictate what is to come. Thus, against Spillers' 'psycho-judicial' fatalism (the dispersion of the family as a loss of grammar and dehumanising naming practices as a form of wound), I will, mark out the patterns of hope as they are formed through the historical traces lurking within the



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present. I will do this by privileging patterns of embodied praxis as important transmissions and transformations of these traces.

#### **Memory as Rhythmic-Gestural Patterning**

In order to carry out this task of reinvigorating an account of black diasporic memory with expression, agency and transformative potential, I now want to develop and unpack what I call "rhythmic-gestural patterning" as the formal framework for change and refiguration in the context of a generalised racial oppression. Rhythmic-gestural patterning is the conduit for organising a cultural dynamic that is neither homogeneous nor absolutely plural; it is neither personal nor collective nor a union of two mutually exclusive entities - but somewhere between all these binaries. Rhythmic-gestural patterning is, to borrow from Merleau-Ponty, a movement of existence 'which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 88). In sum, rhythmic-gestural patterning is a way thinking of about memory within the interstices of soma, space and time.

This union between sound and movement, space and time is constituted here as an attitude and a style of being. This style speaks through the motile body. The snake-like bouncing swagger of young black men on the streets of major western metropolises; the guttural laughter of black women encountered in markets in Kingston, Havana, Lagos and London; the different bodily praxis that characterise black youth cultures such as rap and dancehall, are all cases in point. In this spatio-temporal stylisation of the body, there

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emerges a speaking through the body that ruptures the limits of verbal language in such a way that the privilege assigned to discourse and textuality as the most important expression of human consciousness is challenged (Gilroy 1993: 74).

Rhythmic-gestural patterning therefore highlights the way black diasporic communities use such body forms as a medium for communicating, recounting and re-enacting memories of jubilation and strife and for asserting individual and communal attitudes, for making sense of and filling the gaps opened up by oppression. These patternings are expressive of the minutiae of lives lying outside the dominant culture, according them a distinctive place in the diasporic existential imagination. The African-American philosopher Cornel West would suggest that such patterning acts as *the* site for the creation and emergence of a black intellectual tradition that is organically linked to and rooted in the everyday practices of black communities.<sup>5</sup>

Against and outside a textualist semiotic filter, the rhythmic-gestural patternings that I am describing here are the work of the body, the work of love and desire, of improvisation, of orality, of survival, of journeys, of collective anonymous self-preservation, and of a pleasure that knows its pain. Within the still-standing antique walls of white supremacy, these patternings are the dance of remembrance, of death, of suicide, of hunger, of anger, of bitterness, of shame, of woundedness and frustrated dreams and dreaming. These

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<sup>5</sup>Cornel West writes that “there are two *organic* intellectual traditions in Afro-American life: *the Black Christian tradition of preaching and the black musical tradition of performance*” (1991: 136). He suggests that although both traditions are linked to the life of the mind, they are oral, improvisational, and historical. For West, these traditions, unlike black literate intellectual tradition has the weight of ‘institutional matrices over time and space within which there are accepted rules of procedure, criteria for judgement, canons for assessing performance, models of past achievement and present emulation, and an acknowledged



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patterning are continuously revisited, rehearsed, reworked, and reinvented for the emergence of new variations that match new situation. In doing so, rhythmic-gestural patterning frames the mood for connections across and within a time-space matrix in which dissipated bodies with their scattered histories flow out into the world in an effort 'to remake the world in their own image' (Baldwin 1951: 50).

Through the body, memory is cauterised from the brain, from images and surfaces that make sense or are judged by the rules of sense. A different language of memory will need to be invented, incorporating rhythm, gesture and the 'gift' of the wound (Slattery 2000). Memory in the body is not clear, logical, subject to the rules of the excluded middle or of non-contradiction. An embodied approach to memory calls up a language that has a different order, or indeed a non-order that emerges from out of a self as it is layered within the folds of tradition. Although the word "patterning" connotes a form of logic and order, as we shall see, it is a form of ordering which is nonetheless not logistic or deterministic. Body memory is what in another context James Snead calls 'the return of the pre-logical past' (1984: 71) an existential dynamic that can only be articulated within the dynamic play of the past-present future.

#### *Habit-body and Momentary body*

One way of thinking about the pre-logical somatic past is through the body's ability to perform an action or skill. For instance, knowing how to ride a bicycle or perform a

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succession and accumulation of superb accomplishments' (ibid: 136).

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particular dance move is not given to me as a conscious trajectory or mental schema I refer to at each moment of performance (Connerton 1989).<sup>6</sup> Knowledge of these skills are acquired through repeated action and engagement which, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1990), become learned dispositions that are reproduced in different social fields and situations. Once acquired, the body is capable of drawing on other resources (such as video replay of the action) to improve on techniques and devise strategies that can be incorporated into their existing repertoire. For example, I don't watch videos of other dancers so that I can learn afresh how to do a particular movement. Rather, in watching them, I hope I can pick up tips that will complement and improve my own dance vocabulary. The more skills I learn the more sedimented they become. And so the story goes on for the transmission of habits at large. As new expressive forms get consolidated into habits we again often encounter difficulties trying to explain how we perform them to others.

Let me use example from my own personal experience. Whilst I was in Jamaica, I really wanted to learn how to do the 'butterfly' - a popular dance in Jamaican dancehall culture. Butterfly involves taken the *pliei* position, the weight spread through the entire feet, then the knees moves in and the bottom protrudes outwards. It is the same action as a breaststroke in swimming, only in the lower region. Difficult, but once mastered I am told it is effortless. However, I did not find this to be the case. The more I practised the clumsier I felt. To mask my ineptitude I would frequently import and mix movement

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<sup>6</sup> Apparently, in training, footballers are now being complemented with microscopic analysis of each action on video, available for constant re-viewing. This kind of analysis is however only available to professional players, who already possess the necessary skills and physical aptitude. In other words, this example does not suggest in any way that learning through habit is weakened by technological innovation.



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vocabularies that are extrinsic to the butterfly, but not entirely inappropriate in the hips and pelvis of a skilled butterflyer. The difficulties I encountered had to do with the fact that I was trying to learn a move alien to my body. My two teachers, the Jamaican choreographer L'Antinotte Steine and my young eighteen-year-old housemate, kept saying: "just keep on practising", "stop thinking", "you concentrating too hard. Let your body do the thinking. Let your body talk to you". "You English or somethin". "Practise more". "Don't concentrate, and your body will take you there". I wanted the movements to be broken down to its last components, but my teachers appear incapable of articulating the movements in any clear verbal form. All they could do was to demonstrate and invite me to follow. I am usually quick at picking up new dance steps, but for some reason butterfly completely eluded me and, needless to say, the more frustrated I got the less I practised.

Of course, acquired corporeal dispositions such as doing the butterfly cannot be grasped intellectually - they can only be imbibed through continuous practice and mimesis. 'Habit', Connerton writes, 'is a knowledge and a remembering in the hands and in the body; and in the cultivation of habit it is our body which understands' (1989: 95). Of course, habitual forms of somatic understanding are often used in the service of power. In his text *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault provided numerous examples of the workings of power to alter the habitual body to produce another way of being in the body that conforms to regimes of power. He argues that through various institutional regimes, the body, mind and emotions are disciplined and transformed into useful "docile bodies". In the last chapter, through Spillers' analysis, we saw how African agents turned from

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being liberated subjects to commodified properties. Through being named, branded, acquiring language, labour training, Christianisation and racialisation, the African subject is, according to G.M. James Gonzalez, 'fully transformed into a slave, an object of utility' (1997: 131). However, despite this transformation, diasporic black people persistently resisted this habituation. This is evident in the persistence of African kinaesthetics in social and cultural habits. For example, the predominance of flexed knees and pelvic contractions as the bases for different black social dance forms, the importance of angularity in stance or art and detached facial expressions which Robert Farris Thompson refers to as the 'aesthetic of the cool' in African culture all constitute the continuation and modification of cultural sediments (Hurstun 1933, Thompson 1966). We can begin to see how cultural horizons are embodied and continued.

In the same way that we can easily acquire a habit, we can also transform it, revealing another way of being in our body and world. Habit-memory is therefore only sustained through continuous use or in the absence of negating external forces. Habit is never absolute; it is always in competition with other habits that are at hand to displace it when not in use. As Elaine Scarry argues, a habit that has been cultivated over a lifetime can become radically lost, or unmade, in situations of prolonged infliction of physical pain:

The arms that had learned to gesture in a particular way are unmade; the hands that held within them not just blood and bone but the movements that made possible the playing of the piano are unmade; the fingers and palms that knew in intricate detail the weight and feel of a particular tool



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are unmade; the feet that had within them 'by heart' (that is as, as a matter of deep bodily habit) the knowledge of how to pedal a bicycle are unmade; the head and arms and back and legs that contained within them an elaborate sequence of steps in a certain dance are unmade; all are deconstructed along with the tissue itself, the sentient source and site of all learning (1985: 123)

The above shows that while habits are not always amenable to change, they cannot be thought of as frozen, prescriptive, mechanical and unchanging. On the contrary, habits have 'something of the moment of existence' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 84) which give them meaning. This momentary existence or spontaneity of the body allows for an alternative mode of habituating our body. The dialogue between the "habit-body" and the "momentary body" involves a switch between passivity and agency. Whilst traditions may become entrenched, these considerations entail that we need not accept or indeed be bound to the reproduction of pernicious and oppressive patterns of being. No matter how entrenched our collective habits are, there is always the *possibility* of a rupture, the potential to establish new ways of being habituated, and of differentiating oneself from the community in this way. If I remain solely in my habit-body, I have not learned or incorporated my engagement in and with the world. Therefore, my world remains outside the theatre of existence and I have not taken up the rich possibilities that are available within my world historical-culture. I am therefore suggesting that habit is not essentially levelled-off or of the banal. Rather it allows for the possibility of pre-reflective attunements to the world becoming dynamic. While habit very often

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reproduces oppressive normative patterns, it can also be the ground of expression and freedom. For instance, a voice that learns to sing the blues *can* become a voice that takes the blues tradition further along its history. The history of each genre of expression can therefore be told in terms of how a new voice led to the ruptures at work in the evolution of tradition.<sup>7</sup> Again, Simone has argued that the over-emphasis on white racism and its distortion of black sociality tend to obscure the different ways 'the Black World has been circumventing, mediating and counter-manipulating that racism for several centuries' (1989: 157).

Merleau-Ponty has argued that when we reduce habit and, by extension, tradition into an unchanging temporality, we are in fact repressing the body in its moment of existence, denying the plurality of the world. In choosing sediments over momentary existence, instead of their interplay, 'I forgo my constant power of providing myself with "worlds" in the interest of one of them, and for that very reason this privileged world loses its substance and eventually becomes no more than *a certain dread*' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 83). The switch between the momentary body and habit body therefore allows for an account of the oscillation between stasis and fate on the one hand and fluidity and possibility on the other. This antiphony is the key to understanding the creative contribution and adaptability of the body-instrument. It is precisely through being habituated to the world or place that one can, through expression and a switch to the momentary body, begin to change it and generate an alternative way of being in the world.

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<sup>7</sup> See Judith Bradford and Crispin Sartwell's (1997) 'Voiced Bodies/Embodied Voices' in *Race/Sex: Their Sameness, Difference, and Interplay* (ed.) Naomi Zack Routledge: New York 1997



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Of course, the mercurial nature of the habit-body is not always a conduit for the good. An adaptive notion of habit does not spell redemption, let alone imply an intrinsic force of benevolence or redemption. Creative transformativity at the corporeal level can be used for malign purposes just as much as for benign ones. For instance, the body can adapt itself to a situation by re-inforcing a reactive reflex, transforming the body-image of the other from one position to the next. According to Iris Marion Young, because the dominant culture defines and associates certain groups with their bodies and bodily characteristics, 'Those who experience such an "epidermalizing" of their world [...] discover their status by means of the embodied behaviour of others, in gestures, a certain nervousness that they exhibit, their avoidance of eye contact, the distance they keep (1990b: 123). Young therefore, argues that explicit forms of race hatred and grotesque forms of stereotyping can be modulated within the pre-conscious somatic layer, or 'dwelling in everyday habits and cultural meanings' (ibid:124) becoming less overt, more subtle, and ultimately more insidious.

At this juncture, it is necessary to show how the body's active/passive instrumentality relates to *tradition*. In many respects, tradition is habit writ large. Whatever local relation our bodies may have to particular habits, rituals and places, they are always circumscribed by the wider field of the tradition itself. The writer Ralph Ellison's first love was music, in particular jazz. This mastery of or attunement to the form allows him to express how jazz mutates through individual participation.

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The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organisation. I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve this creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. Life could be harsh, loud and wrong if it wished, but they lived it fully, when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form. (Ellison 1955: 189-190)

The antiphony between individual and group in jazz therefore is both the mirror and framework for the larger relationship between the momentary body of performance and the tradition itself. The body renders tradition discontinuous through continuing it. Just as recollection and forgetting may both conserve memory only by constructing it anew, so too a tradition may have to mutate by way of changed circumstances in order to survive. As an elderly Malian Imam puts it, when discussing the ending of the practice of female circumcision: 'Change must discover unexpected reasons for its existence; it too must be surprised at what it brings about. Only in the tension between the old and new does the elaboration of a moral practice occur' (Hecht and Simone 1994: 17). Tradition is therefore not a blueprint; it is more an open resource, a mutable corporeal lexicon, a rag-bag of unforeseen potentiality. As Hecht and Simone continue,



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African traditional societies, far from embedding individuals in stolid norms and procedures, generate their own highly plural and contradictory forms, engaging different peoples and activities over a broad landscape.  
(ibid: 39)

In this sense, tradition itself is not fixed in advance, handed down by some authorial lineage. Tradition is an alchemy of the body as the body is an alchemy of tradition. Tradition and its bodies are mutually constitutive. Ultimately, in black diasporic expression, nobody knows at any point who is doing what to whom, or what is doing whom to what. When Charlie Parker played the break in "A Night in Tunisia" that some say started Be-bop, we cannot say whether jazz was breaking with itself through the man, or whether the man was breaking with himself through jazz. One suspects indeed that jazz was breaking with itself as the man was breaking with himself. In either case, the tradition is forgotten and renewed according to the different needs and demands presented to it.

It is perhaps necessary to reiterate here that what is transmitted or remembered through rhythmic-gestural patterning is not a cognitive structure. Rather, tradition and memory operate first of all as "tacit knowledge". The body's being-in-the-world ensures that this tacit knowledge does not operate as a fixed schema. That is, as the body adapts to new situations, or interacts with the other, the ways in which it draws upon and transforms the tradition itself will differ. It is in this way that a dynamic account of the body's habituated adoption and adaption of its tradition bears similarities to a hermeneutic

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account. The tradition is in a sense “interpreted” by the body through the difference of the present. The theorisation offered here is therefore akin to a *corporealised hermeneutics*: a 'thrice told tale' of the body. A story is told by the body, and in the telling, this story repeats and transforms the original, leading to a different tale of the body, to be told again differently in the future. However, the difference between the dynamic traditionality offered here and conventional hermeneutics is that the body's transformation of its life-world is not first of all mental or representational.

Once more, the language of essentialism, anti-essentialism or Gilroy's "anti-anti-essentialism cannot work within this conceptualisation of body memory. The body simply does not respond to its sedimented horizons in the same way that a historian or sociologist musing over hybrid cultural artefacts does. This is not to say that the body does not respond to those same cultural artefacts or indeed make of itself a cultural artefact, as I will argue in the next chapter in the case of women in dancehall culture. It is merely the case that the body's memory starts from itself, within the horizons of the incarnated present relation with a community of others, rather than starting from a speculative or intellectualist distance. Thus, diasporic memories of the body must begin with the ambiguous *existence* of the body in the present, rather than from the alleged clarity of a logical operation.



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### Rhythms of Existence

Just as children leave a universal world of cries and movements only to imitate their first environment, so too does body memory in general continually mime its world-historical environment. In his book *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig writes, 'The ability to mime, and mime well [...] is the capacity to other' (1993: 19). Ideally, to embrace otherness is to embrace selfhood and the possibility for cultural reproduction. Through my encounter with the other, I learn, grow and I am altered without being consumed by the other. Of course, these ideals may at any point be subverted by the asymmetries of power. I may be seduced, or I may seduce; I may appropriate without reference, or I may be appropriated without reference. If we bracket the ever possible intervention of power distortions here, we can say that the body's expressive capacities emerge out of this *mimesis* - understood not simply as the art of copy or repetition, but as Alberto Perez-Gomez states, as the 'expression of feelings and the manifestation of experience through movement, musical harmonies, the rhythms of speech' (1994: 14). As with the body of the child, the adult takes up the sense of her cultural horizons by renewing the body's power to adapt them to new circumstances. The sense of the world is directed through the body in the moment prior to linguistic behaviour, not through a primordial conceptualisation or a mechanically produced rationalisation but through the world understood as patterns of movement and rhythm.

The momentary body of habit becomes an agent of change through repetition and rhythm. Rhythm inhabits every level of being. To that extent it is in fact a form of fundamental

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ontology. From the rhythms of the planets and the cosmos producing on earth day and night, tides and weather, to the rhythms of the viscera and organic life, to the rhythm of the music of joy and sorrow - and all the pulses of motion between, rhythm lies at the heart of things - a rhythmic seed within the flesh of the world. The Senegalese poet Leopald Senghor writes,

Rhythm is the architecture of being, the inner dynamic that gives it form, the pure expression of the life force. Rhythm is the vibratory shock, the force which, through our sense, grips us at the root of our being. It is expressed through corporeal and sensual means, through lines, surfaces, colours and volumes in architecture, sculpture or painting; through accents in poetry and music, through movements in the dance [...]. In the degree to which rhythm is sensually embodied, it illuminates the spirit. (Quoted in Jacqui Malone 1996: 32).

Along parallel lines, Henri Lefebvre (1996) has produced exquisite analyses of the world understood first of all not as a spatiality nor as a temporality but as a rhythm: through his notion of *rhythmanalysis*. Rather than seeing the urban form as static or frozen in space (as with a plan perspective), Lefebvre allows the urban its rhythms - the flow of traffic, of certain activities repeating daily - school children leaving schools, shopkeepers opening shops and so on. Rhythm for Lefebvre links bodies into a heterogeneous collectivity, and therefore 'all gatherings of bodies are poly-rhythmical, that is composed of various rhythms, each part, each organ or function having its own in a perpetual interaction which



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constitutes an ensemble or a whole' (1996: 230). The philosophical suggestion behind Lefebvre's poetic analysis is that we ought not to privilege a spatial ontology over a temporal one (or vice versa), nor should we persist with a Cartesian autonomous individuated subject. As I shall show in the next chapter, the sheer creativity of dancehall culture cannot be seen purely as a product of African-Jamaican cultural heritage; the culture does not exist in outside of a relation to other cultures and other times. Dancehall culture can therefore not be thought as purely spatial or temporal. Like many other urban forms or bodies, dancehall is irreducibly *spatio-temporal* in a dialogue within and without the group. Rhythm then becomes another way of naming an irreducible spatio-temporality. As Lefebvre writes,

[...] every rhythm implies the relation of a time with a space, a localized time, or if one wishes, a temporalized place. Rhythm is always linked to such and such a place, to its place, whether it be the heart, the fluttering of the eyelids, the movement of a street, or the tempo of a waltz. (ibid: 231)

In this way, the diasporic body, as with the urban form, can be viewed from a rhythm-analytical perspective. Rather than freezing the body within a time slice, as if the body's form is first of all like a sculpture fixed in space, rhythmanalysis shows that the body's fleshy materiality always manifests itself through movement. Motility is the dance of becoming being; the intentional arc or postural schema that generates embodied action is a form of the body's time.

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Of course, the rhythm of the body often begins with, or is excited by, *music*. And in theorising the black diaspora, the role of rhythm as an organising principle in aesthetic and existential life must be engaged with. Dancing is the visible and physical materialisation of rhythm. Thompson notes of West African and diasporic dance, ‘it is one of the dancer’s aims to make every rhythmic subtlety of the music visible’ (1966: 89). All black musical expression is culturally inseparable from its visual and physical responsiveness in dance movement, creating a conversation between music and movement. The aesthetic appreciation of diasporic music is based on its capacity to move, incite, excite, soothe, converse, compete, listen and respond to the body in dance. A good dancer is said to be the listener who has heard, understood and interpreted the music and then supplies the beat, inserts her own individuality to the silences and the gaps opened up in the music. Conversely, a good musician is said to be capable of dancing to and within each beat. Thus, as Chernoff suggests,

The One who “hears” the music “understands” it with a dance, and the participation of the dancer is therefore the rhythmic interpretation [...] described as the aesthetic foundation of appreciation, the essential foothold on the music, so to speak. (1979: 143)

Within diasporic dance social spaces, a musical performance is judged by the extent to which both the audience and musicians are moved towards the dancefloor or moved to dance in the mind. As Richard Waterman puts it ‘Essentially, [...] African music, with



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few exceptions, is to be regarded as music for the dance, although 'the dance' involved may be entirely a mental one' (cited in Frith 1996: 135). Therefore, music that can move people physically through the dancing experience is highly regarded by black people. This is particularly the case in a context where music, the body and pleasure are closely interlinked with the community's social and aesthetic structure.

This association between music, body and pleasure cannot be seen as an instinctive or 'natural' disposition among African and diasporic communities, nor is it the expression of an ecstatic abandonment which (pan) African rhythmic-gestural expressions are predisposed to<sup>8</sup>. Rather, the turn towards dance must be understood within the context of a cultural horizon that takes collective rhythmic-gestural participation to be an important vehicle for the actualisation of aesthetic, social and ancestral values. But what is it about black music that speaks directly to the body? How does the music induce a speaking *through* the body?

For Leopold Senghor, rhythm is what defines and unites all black cultural styles - music, dancing, walking and talking. He writes: 'The organising force which makes the black style is *rhythm*. It is the most perceptible and least material thing' (cited in Chernoff 1979: 23). The emphasis on polymeter or rhythmic complexity has been recognised as what distinguishes African music (despite the differences in instruments, tonal organisation and vocal styles [Chernoff *ibid*: 40]) from modern European music, where

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<sup>8</sup> According to Jacqui Malone, 'self-abandonment and frenzy have no place in this environment. A social event is an occasion to show character, to become ancestral, to exhibit control, composure, and good taste (Jacqui Malone 1996: 19)

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harmonic and melodic progression is privileged. For A.M Jones, 'Rhythm is to the African what harmony is to the Europeans, and it is in the complex interweaving of contrasting rhythmic patterns that he finds his greatest aesthetic satisfaction' (cited in Chernoff *ibid*: 40). This is not to say that European music always lacks rhythmic or percussive traits and African music always lacks a rich melody or harmony. Rather, the difference is an outcome of contrasting and distinct aesthetic sensibilities emerging within different traditions and different histories.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Rhythmic Gestures*

It is thus that rhythm begins through *gesture*, through movements of the body directed into sense. A hand rises, a pelvis rotates, and the opportunity for remembrance and repetition begins. This opportunity for remembrance can be observed in the emphasis on angularity in styles of walking, greetings, dress and performance of the black diaspora (Malone 1996: 34). Writing in the 1930s, Zora Neale Hurston writes of the retention of African gestures among African-Americans:

After adornment the next most striking manifestation of the negro is angularity. Everything that he touches becomes angular. In all African sculpture and doctrine of any sort we find the same thing. Anyone watching negro dancers will be struck by the same phenomena. Every

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<sup>9</sup> The introduction of musical notation appears to be central in changing the history of European music. In his book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (1992), the British free jazz guitarist Derek Bailey charts the demise of improvisation within the European classical tradition since the seventeenth century.



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posture is another angle. Pleasing, yes. But an effect achieved by the very means which a European strives to avoid. (1933: 297)

It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty's assertion that 'my organ of perception [involves] a thought older than myself, of which those organs are merely a trace' (1962: 351) maybe understood. Before the knowledge or experience of the subject comes to bear witness, the body begins to take up a stance or a pattern of gesture through the movement of repetition and the repetition of movement. The body remembers and only later does the subconscious mind awake, if at all. In the face of restrictive dynamics within the habitus and limitations imposed through asymmetries of power, the task ahead in this thesis is to allow this pre-personal work of the body to attain the status of agency and name it as a mode of resistance and erotic communion.

The embodiment of memory through rhythm is expressed through gesture. Rhythm and gesture need each other in order for remembrance to enact itself, prior to thought. The repetition of movement can only take place when that movement has an order or a schema and is expressive of something. Mimesis, as the expression of feelings, requires an intentional arc of gesture that gathers the body within the realm of meaning. Without gesture, the movement of dance has no signification. Gesture is the meaning towards which any dance form moves and around which it is organised; gesture is the destination of any dance. Gesture is at the same time retrospective, it is always the attempt to communicate back towards previous modes of expression as a way of signifying the

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difference of the present. Although pre-linguistic, the remembrance at work here is nonetheless a sign - an arc of meaning that communicates with itself and to others. Even the slightest gesture emerges within the field of meaning and communication: to gesture *just is* to communicate something with the body to an audience.

It might seem at first sight strange that the body is deemed able to communicate with itself *prior* to conscious awareness. This sentiment dissipates once we consider such phenomena as psychosomatic disorders, where the body communicates a problem that has arisen out of emotional or psychic distress before it is named as such. The case of self-harming as an expression of something that is not known to the subject (and therefore remains incommunicable even though the body communicates), or the case of yoga where emotions are released through the practice of different positions (known as *asanas*) show that the body has a consciousness that is pre-reflective, aware of the world prior to the world being thought.

#### ***Cultural Patterns***

In order to attain the full sense of rhythmic gestural patterning it is crucial to see that this marriage between rhythm and gesture is itself a *patterning*, the establishment of the form of *re*-memoration. The pre-logical dynamics of memory are not absolutely disordered. Denying that there is a 'logic' to memory is not the same as advocating complete random redistribution of the effects of the past within the present. The form body-memory takes is always somewhere between determinism and chaos, conformity and disruption; the



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difference that repeating the past within the present makes is therefore partly ordered, and partly without precedent. How is this so?

As already noted, the point is to see that remembrance takes place against the backdrop of a cultural horizon. As the body takes up its potential within the present moment, certain figures, rhythms and gestures are gathered pre-reflectively as possibilities for action. The learning and mimesis of childhood grants the subject a set of pre-dispositions to grasp and express in a certain way. Tracy D. Snipe writes that in dance cultures such as those of the black world

children are taught the critical awareness of body aesthetics, and how to express a wide variety of emotions like anger, grief, sadness, love, and hatred through dance [...]. Moreover, from infancy to adulthood the young are taught the spiritual or secular significance of a dance and so form an acute dance consciousness that is retained throughout life.  
(1996: 66)

This *ordering* or disciplining of the body is not absolutely determinative however, for the body's occupation of the present is another way of referring to the rupture of time in the space of the now. Although different traditions are more or less responsive to internal tension and change, in general we can say that the present moment is not closed or fixed; it is a site of openness, where things may be done differently on the one hand, and on the other the site for the perpetuation of tradition. In this respect, the ordering of the present

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is met with openness to a bodily *spontaneity*<sup>10</sup> which fulfils the present's rupture. The body can improvise its way out of the past, as a jazz musician can take the repertoire and deform it, in order to make a new melody out of the same rhythm or play the same melody to a different rhythm. To dramatise the point: the body enters the space of the present, and through gesture and dance, the present ruptures what has been given by the past. The body follows a pattern of walking or speech, and finds itself again within a new scene and gets altered. A repetition is differentiated from itself and the circle of tradition continues, as it is de-centred, yet again.

Through the differential movement of patterning, rhythm and gesture come together to establish another relation to the cultural horizon. The intentional arc of gesture points always towards the present, where things are open to change. A patterning emerges as a rhythm and a bodily inflection enfold themselves within the circumstances of a new present. The difference that is produced within this active matrix of memory is therefore almost inevitable. Again, while variations in openness occur across cultures, in general the existential situation of the present is always new; therefore the way in which the body moves towards the situation using resources passed secretly and without words from generation to generation will be always new. The young girl passes secrets of the body onto her child as she becomes the mother of new possibilities of mimesis and expression.

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that spontaneity here is not a flight of fancy that has emerged from nowhere. Rather, it emerges from the full awareness of the forms and discourses informing the culture or tradition in which we are embedded. As Levin citation of Govinda indicates, 'spontaneity is built on practice...it is a product of long-repeated actions in the past...which have become so ingrained in one's nature that they need no further



### Differential Repetition

So far I have been suggesting that the past becomes a series of repeated movements open to differentiation through the possibilities opened up in the present. In order to take this point about memory, difference and repetition further, we need to see how the transformative possibility contained within it has become part of the *structure* of black diasporic culture. As I have shown, the present is a site of openness, and therefore the site of a potential rupture and transformation. This *possibility* of change is guaranteed metaphysically to *any* culture or tradition. However, as I have suggested it is absolutely crucial to understand at this point that transformation is *not automatically given*. There is no inevitability to a tradition being re-worked, tweaked, inflected or whatever. From a metaphysical point of view, the present is necessarily transformative only in the *virtual* sense. Things could stay the same, the revolution (televised or not) need not happen. What is required for things to change and for the present to lead to transformation is that there is a *desire* and *fulfilment* of this metaphysical promise. There must be an energy or a cultural dynamic or a set of existential conditions that intervene within the present to take advantage of this openness, and for the virtual transformativity of the present to become an actuality. Again, even if these conditions are in place, transformation is still not guaranteed. Beyond desire and existential opportunity, as I have emphasised above, power structures may still inhibit adaptations: internally, the structure of collective habit may be impeded by conservative forces, and externally, the culture may be almost completely restricted in its expression through political mobilisation.

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decision or effort of will' (1985: 213).

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It is at this point that the specificities of a culture and existential situation become key. I suggest that in the case of black diasporic culture the metaphysical openness of the present is often fulfilled by actual transformation. Many observers of African and black diasporic cultures have written about the role of repetition in these cultures as organising principles for dealing with issues of agency, aesthetic, social life, invasion and habits of being in the world (Drewel 1992; Gates 1988, Levine 1978). I suggest, therefore, that it is the emphasis placed upon repetition and difference that in many cases (though not all) entails that for black cultures the present will see some form of alteration of the given, through what Leroy Jones has called the 'changing same'. Difference and repetition are not just metaphysical possibilities in black diasporic culture; they are actually *practised* and are central to the culture's understanding and preservation of itself.

The emphasis placed here upon actual transformativity within black cultures is not intended as a disavowal of the fact that cultural and historical sedimentations are reproduced (often in the most conservative manner); the point is rather that transformation can only be obtained *through* processes of inertia. The logic of transformation must therefore be clarified as an intertwining of sameness and difference (as Jones' phrase suggests). For something to change requires that there are characteristics of that object that stay the same; otherwise if transformation were "total", the object would cease to exist. For example two people can perform the Sango Dance *Bata* and we recognise it as such; however, as each performer inflects the dance with her own world-historical agency, a noticeable difference will be observed without the formal



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element of Bata being lost. As Margaret Thompson Drewal writes, "in order for that which is repeated to comment on the past, it would have to maintain some recognisable relationship to it"(1992: 5). Therefore, the emphasis placed above on the openness of the present can be actualised only in the context of layers of sedimentation, internalisation and naturalisation against which the transformation can take place. We must rethink spontaneity as that which takes place only when embedded within a given historico-cultural frame, rather than as a *pure* spontaneity without ground.

But how does this space of openness and spontaneous potentiality within the field of inertia become an actuality within black culture? What are the factors that have enabled black culture to rise to these metaphysical possibilities and to inaugurate the transformative path of repetition and difference? The answers to these questions have already been given, in summary form. As was stated above, "an energy or a cultural dynamic or a set of existential conditions" intervenes to fulfill the possibilities for transformation. The task at hand now is to unpack these factors and specify how they operate within black diasporic culture, even when relations of power and force of tradition - internal and external – militate against change.

In terms of energy and cultural dynamics, James Snead's work suggests a way forward, particularly in terms of his analysis of repetition and 'cut'. The cut is Snead's way of referring to repetition and difference. The cut is also known as the "return beat", or the "breakbeat". For Snead, repetition allows each culture to assess and respond to internal and external changes and progress. However, the extent to which repetition is denied or

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accepted, repressed or highlighted in any culture will depend upon how progress or transformation is perceived (1984: 59). According to Snead, in recent European cultures, repetition is denied in favour of difference, 'defined as progress and growth' (ibid: 60). The dominant European model therefore involves a perpetual transcendence of the present in favour of the future. In this model, progression undermines repetition, eroding the possibility of the gathering of memory along the way, let alone transformation. In contrast, discontinuities and ruptures of black culture are central to *repetition*, as a form of "cutting back" to the beginning. If we bracket Snead's problematic clefting of European and "black" culture, linked as it is to an equally problematic reification and essentialising of discontinuity as it is played out in different terms across the two cultural spheres of European and black, then we can focus on the insight Snead's analysis provides in terms of the patternings of the black diaspora. According to my reading of Snead, difference embedded within a return to the beginning is cut into black cultural reproduction as a sort of deeply-grounded facticity of being. This cutting back to the beginning is corporeal and spatio-temporal. Now, one way of reading this focus on the cut *could* be in terms of essentialism - the cut as an intrinsic property of blackness etc. However, another way of understanding the cut is in terms of historico-cultural sedimentation. The cut is not biological or in the genes; it is the ongoing and constantly mutating residuum of patterns of being that have gathered across and through time and culture. The cut is what is left to black people in the wake of the movements and expressions of those that came before. The cut is therefore a form of *practice*.



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### The Actuality of Transformation

In the following section I want to explore what I have called the *actualisation* of transformativity and 'the cut' as being produced by cultural forms. This will involve temporarily bracketing the existential background through which these forms are enacted or made flesh. However, once I have sketched out these forms, in the next chapter, I shall close the brackets against existence and begin to highlight how the *conditions* of black diasporicity are equally as important factors in the resulting forms of expression as the formal elements themselves.

So, to begin with the expressive practices of the black diaspora. The first question that arises is, what are these practices, and how do they emphasise repetition and difference? The practices of the "cut" can be understood within the parameters of what Robert Farris Thompson has described as the 'five traits' of West African and Diaspora rhythmic-gestural patterning: 1) the dominance of a percussive concept of performance; 2) polymeter; 3) apart-playing and dancing; 4) antiphony or call and response; and 5) the non-musical songs of social allusion/ dances of derision (1966: 95).

I have already discussed what Thompson calls the percussive concept of performance above. To an extent, this particular trait shapes and animates all the other four traits. However, it should be noted that rhythm involves not only the sound but also the *method* by which the sound is created. For example, the methods of apart-playing and the antiphonal relationship between musicians and dancers informs the creation of diasporic

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music. It is important to note that Thompson's five traits do not posit an unchanging, pure original presence. Rather, they suggest an already always disruptive and transformative potentiality.<sup>11</sup> Here, transformation is achieved through *performance*. Every performance repeats elements of the tradition in which it is situated, whilst opening the potential for transformation. 'Repetition', Drewal writes, allows us 'to understand the transformational capacity of performance praxis' (1992: 1). Apart-playing, as we shall see, is essentially ontological, incorporating the self and other dancing, intersecting, interpreting, altering and differentiating each other. I will argue that apart-playing is the incessant matrix of innovation that produces adaptation. It is this trans-cultural formal structure of black diasporic expression that facilitates a memory born of survival, mutating across time. The key point is that it is the formal elements of expression which maintains survival for black diasporic agents - across seas, time and destitution. This is not to argue that form alone determines adaptability - as we shall see in the next chapter, the formal itself must be grounded.

Let us continue with our examination of Thompson's traits by comparing European music with African. Meter is the standard unit of measuring time in modern European music. Generally, each instrument in an orchestra shares the same meter (Erik Davis 1999, Chernoff 1979). Davis writes that 'the shared rhythm is counted evenly and stressed on every main beat' (p3). In contrast to the African model, rhythm is said to be simpler and

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<sup>11</sup> As Henry Louis Gates notes, to name a black tradition 'is to rename each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they might seem. To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify (1988: xxiii).



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subordinated to harmonic and melodic complexity in European music (Chernoff 1979, Frith 1996, Manuel 1995).<sup>12</sup>

African music on the other hand is described as polymetric. Polymeter refers to different metrics, or forms of *measure*, taking place at once. Instead of slavishly following a single beat, African music begins by playing with the time of the music itself or *listening* out for the offbeat accents produced by *other* musicians/instrument. The syncopation or the space between beats and off-beats tempts the musician to fill the gap opened up, adding to the existing rhythms to produce a complex shifting whole. Polymetric practices are therefore forms of expression where in a group situation, each player or performer concentrates on their own rhythm or movement, responding to the other performers by integrating their changes within their own terms.<sup>13</sup> As the great African-American bassist Charles Mingus writes in his autobiography *Beneath the Underdog*, '[...] imagine a circle surrounding each beat - each guy can play his notes anywhere in that circle and it gives him a feeling he has more space. The notes fall anywhere inside the circle but the original feeling for the beat isn't changed' (1962, 351). Although, in itself, the individual rhythm might be quite simple, once combined with other rhythms a complex syncopated pattern of beats soon emerges.

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<sup>12</sup>However, there are numerous cases where this is not the case. We can think of Western musicians such as Stravinsky or Steve Reich, whose musical compositions are rhythmically complex and make use of repetition. Similarly, not all forms of diasporic black music emphasise rhythm in their music. As Manuel notes of reggae dancehall, the music has 'sparse instrumentation and less-complex rhythms, the musical accompaniment taking a back-seat to the deejay's vocals' (1995: 173)

<sup>13</sup> An individual musician playing unaccompanied may also play polymetrically. For instance, the ferocious playing of the African-American pianist Cecil Taylor often involves highly complex percussive effects on one instrument.

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According to Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the difference initiated by a group of musicians is what generates rhythm and 'not the repetition, which nevertheless produces it: productive repetition has nothing to do with reproductive meter' (quoted in Davis 3). Polyrhythm is therefore not the same as polymeter. Whilst polyrhythm suggests many beats at once in a rhythm, polymeter advances a stage further by suggesting different units of measure themselves playing at the same time. Whilst polyrhythm may involve different rhythms playing around the same time signature (4/4 time), polymeter involves different meters themselves playing apart (say a rhythm in 3/4 playing next to a rhythm in 6/8). For Deleuze and Guattari, rhythm is critical, heterogeneous and 'always undergoing transcoding', unlike meter which is dogmatic and 'operates in a homogeneous space-time' (ibid:3).

As stated above, this self-and-other arrangement need not be solely percussive or communal. Just as a complex drumbeat can be separated into different elements working differently to produce a whole, so too can the dancing body become 'polymetric.' The dancer uses different parts of her body to mark out, respond and emphasise different parts of the polymetric whole, at which point she tries to supply another rhythm. A good dancer listens out - just like the musician - to two or more rhythms or a "hidden" beat and attempts to comment on and replicate them, supplying a motile presence to the suppressed beat. Just as the rhythmic patterning of the music is never linearly constant, that is, it is always swinging or cutting back and forth, so too the dancer's body is never constant. The dancing body can move in and out of a gentle slow win'ing to a more explosive motion.



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It is important to note that there is no single form to black expressive polymeter. The fluctuations in the dancing body that mirror the rhythmic counterpoints in the music vary according to cultural, regional and social styles. In some cases, the hips can be isolated from the rest of the body, producing rhythms that play against the background of other rhythms in other parts of the body. As a form of dance, the body itself splits into different elements. Polymetric expression can therefore be described as *apart-playing*. As already noted, in a group, each artist plays *apart* from the others in order to play with them; with the dancing body, the hips may play *apart* from the rest of the body. Apart playing/dancing means that the performers do not try to play or dance the same piece simultaneously, rather they play different things all together. Focusing on his or her own part in the ensemble, each musician helps to create the meaning of the polymetric whole by working "separately together". Working separately together has another purpose: it allows individuals to improvise, innovate, introduce difference and add their own identity to the polymeter.

In the same way that musicians play apart in order to establish unity, dancers also dance apart to establish a unity. Dancing apart does not necessarily mean the absence of physical contact; rather, it involves the ability to maintain a separateness while contributing to a fluid interdependent whole. By dancing apart the dancer is able to dialogue with or challenge the improvisation introduced by the musicians as well as other dancers as she dances alone. The dancer, for Michel Serres, never dances alone. Every dancer always dances with an absence, an other, however unselfconscious. Serres writes,

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‘when the dancer dances alone, he still and always dances with music’ (1995: 46). In the same way that a dancer always dances with music, the musician (especially in live acts) also relies on the dancer to initiate variation in the polymeter.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, at the core of rhythmic-gestural patterning is the dialogic interchange between the past and the present, self and other, repetition and differentiation, sound and motion. Thompson writes:

The master drummer (or drummers) plays alone, intent upon improvisation; the master dancer (dancers), intent upon following or challenging these improvisations, also dances alone. And the drum chorus interacts by repetitive patterns, which means that a certain amount of performing together balances the apartness. But the critical fact seems to be this: *West Africans perform music and dance apart the better to ensure a dialogue between movement and sound.* (1966: 94 my emphasis)

Here then, the voices of expression are inherently plural, bouncing back and forth across each other. There is a sort of paradox inherent within these traits: no voice is entirely itself by itself (for it is always produced through *listening* or *watching* the other), and yet each voice stands apart, maintaining its apartness, its separation or gap from the whole. The cut is a cut that cuts both ways - cutting into listening by making it active, and cutting into expression by making it passive. This self/other process can extend to identity politics. Writing about the need for white people to see that their life and what

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<sup>14</sup>As Chernoff writes, ‘If you are playing for dancers, you can follow those who can stay close to the beat: their movements are clear, and it is indeed easier to improvise on a drum when someone is dancing well. Without dancers, many drummers cannot bring forth a wide range of variations, and in this regard we can suggest that the dance probably played one of the important inspirational roles in the development of jazz. In Highlife music, because some people like to dance to different instruments in an orchestra, many musicians, to help their creativity, like to pick someone who is dancing to their beat and play styles according to the dance (1979: 147).



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they are and will become is tied to the fate of black people, Timothy Maliqalim Simone writes,

The pulling away from another person is as important in the process of creative understanding as is the joining with them. A sense of interaction is maintained only as long as interactants acknowledge themselves as different and the difference is not construed as prohibitive of the interaction.[...] the function of the interaction is not to calibrate, regulate, or homogenize the effects or outcomes but to cultivate, albeit, redistribute the difference. Each person is altered, but not for the purpose of equalizing or synthesizing each person's impact on the other. The oscillation of separateness and togetherness is a dynamic yet to be imagined in the context of American race relations. (1989: 196)

It has often been said that Africans acculturated themselves rapidly to New World ideas, values and structures. This capacity to swing back and forth to embrace separateness and togetherness I suggest emerges out of the *antiphonal* structure of the Africanism in diasporic black cultures. In musical terms, antiphony is the repetitive element developed from a dominant conversation (ie a background or hidden beat) where there is a switch back and forth from solo to chorus or from solo to an emphatic instrumental reply (Chernoff 1979: 55). Such a device pervades much diasporic music, gestural, and oral patterns. Listen to the opening sermon in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*:

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"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness' And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black.."

"In the beginning..."

"At the very start," they cried.

"...there was blackness"

"Preach it..."

"...and the sun"

"The sun, Lawd..."

"...was bloody red..."

"I said black is..."

"Preach it, brother..."

"...an' black ain't". (1952: 9-10)

Chernoff writes, 'The chorus or response is a rhythmic phrase which recurs regularly; the rhythms of a lead singer or musician vary and are cast against the steady repetition of the response' (1979: 55). Antiphony is also true of dance. Citing J. Van Wing, Thompson, describes the antiphony in dance among the Bakongo peoples of present day Congo thus:

There are always two bodies or two groups of bodies in movement: a solo dancer in front of a group, or an individual before another in a group, or an individual before another in a couple, or two groups placed in front of the other. They perform periodic movements that are like questions and



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responses. (cited in Thompson 1966: 95)

Antiphony 'is a means of putting innovation and tradition, invention and imitation, into amicable relationships with one another' (ibid: 98) Numerous examples of antiphonal in dance abound. In breakdancing, like its Brazilian antecedent Capoeira, there is always a solo performer inside a ring who performs exquisite acrobatic spins in order to communicate with and invite another breaker to attempt to challenge and match up their routine. In dub dancing, whether it is a solo win'ing or partnering, it always presupposes the presence of another to whom one communicates or with whom one dances with.

Finally, *songs of allusion and dances of derision* are in addition moral in content. Their aim is both to reconstitute performatively a subject's action whilst leaving them open to ridicule. In songs, there is a satirical word play which suggestively rebukes transgressive behaviour whilst shaming it. Thompson has argued that dances of derision are common traits in many forms of West African dancing. Dancers can often imitate and mock, with exaggerated details the minutiae of an action with an uncanny cruel precision. Camille Poupeye calls them "satire in action". Kaigh describes them as "dances of domestic oddities" (cited in Thompson). A recent example from dancehall culture is the popularity of the dance known as "Mr Bean". So named after the British comic of the same name, the dance involves twitching and spasms. "Mr Bean" is a mimetic symbolisation of deformity on the one hand, and on the other, the ability to contort the body with such precision bears testimony to the agility of the dancer. Such dances of allusion can also be read as a commentary on what is visibly present to the dancer, but also act as a reflection

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on the distortion and the violence of the existential scene. Songs of allusion and dances of derision are, for Thompson, the embodiment of a community's self-regulative devices and the self-consciousness of the wider society. Thompson notes that this last trait is so powerful that the formal colonial authorities of present day Republic of Zambia outlawed any dancing which is intended for ridicule. "As chapter 20, section 7 of the former law implies: No person may organize or take part in any dance which is calculated to hold up to ridicule or to bring into contempt any person, religion, or duly constituted authority' (1966: 96). For Thompson, this shows the power of the 'words that are made flesh' in African dances.

All these five traits - a percussive or rhythmic sense of performance, polymeter, apart-playing, antiphony, and songs and dances of derision, cluster around each other to describe the form of black diasporic expression and existence. Whether it is jazz, the women in half-handstand gyrating their buttocks in dancehall, the breakbeat of hip-hop and the mutant polymeter of jungle, two or more elements clash to produce a complex whole. Given this situation, the played-apart space of black expression is less a *visual* space than an *acoustic* space: the noise-space that surrounds the whole of the body admits of more complexity and plurality than the visual field that directs perception to that which is in front. With acoustic space, the proximity of noises retain their separation, whereas with visual space, synthesis inevitably produces unification of otherwise separate elements.



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Ultimately, in black culture, apart-playing is *ontological*. Polymer is derived from a discourse between self and other, immanence and transcendence, suggesting an intimacy between polymer and polytheism. This can best be explained if I situate myself in relation to the other as second person. My rhythm or identity works only by adapting yours, and yet I maintain myself within my own rhythm - I do not fall into yours. The otherness of your performance is kept in its otherness (I do not merely copy your rhythm, or the movements of your body), and yet, this otherness becomes my own, as my inward moment is decentered from itself.

Antiphony produces criss-crossings between the elements of the whole, generating incessant difference and adaptation. This ontological structure of apart-playing or the cut applies to itself as a whole; it receives its other, and responds to it, rather than curling up into a shell of conservation and homogeneity. Thus when a culture based around antiphonal form travels (despite the condition), it tends to travel well, clinging to, calling and responding to new contexts. New voices get interwoven into the mix. Here, I hope that my argument begins to become clear. Through the formal devices of apart playing, the inherent possibility of transformative diasporic memory gets locked into a frame of *actualisation*. The other is included and responded to, and again the form mutates across contexts, Oceans and destitution as a new form emerges. Apart-playing therefore represents an openness to alterity which ensures both continuation and alteration as that openness embraces different forms of alterity.

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As I suggested above, while apart-playing and the differential repetition of embodied memory constitute important formal elements of the black diaspora, a *purely* formal account can only go so far. Such an account does not give us the grounds for transformation - it only gives the means by which that transformation takes place. To supplement a formal analysis, it is necessary to embed it within an existential context. The key thing is to see that it is not the form of a culture alone, but the existential context and expediency in which the form is produced which enables adaptation. It might be the case that certain formal elements did not survive or travel well because they were not so adaptive. As the next chapter will show, the existential context for black diasporic peoples is one of enduring physical and metaphysical suffering. The context of global hetero-patriarchal white capitalist supremacy puts many black people face to face with the force of annihilation - if not on a daily basis then at key points in their lives. At such moments, as we shall see, an energy or a spirit of will must be fostered, if survival and creativity is to take place. A consideration of the differential repetition of memory therefore points the way towards issues of survival and identity. Rhythmic-gestural patterning opens a language of rememorial embodied resistance, where a way of being-in-the-world is inflected as it is passed from generation to generation: the gestures change as the language that emerges out of them change, but underneath, a matrix of memory links all the threads together within a common fabric.



## **Chapter 4: Survival and the Imagination: The Eroticisation of Pain in Jamaican Dancehall Culture**

In the last chapter I explored the transformation of embodied memory by outlining the formal elements of retention structuring the experiences and expressions of black diasporic agents. I showed that apart playing and dancing, antiphony (call and response), a percussive concept of performance, polymeter and dances of derision are enduring characteristics of black expression that sustain the aesthetic paradigms of the African diaspora. Towards the end, I began to suggest that this formal account is necessary but insufficient. The task at hand to complete the story of diasporic memory is to situate it within its existential context. This work of situation complicates the formal accounts by making the *transmission* of form dynamic. A stress on formal elements threatens to render what is culturally given static, whereas an emphasis on existential context gives dynamism to our notions of both community and body.

In order to provide an existential ground for the formal cultural patterning which I characterised in the last chapter as rhythmic-gestural patterning, I want to begin by exploring the work of Elaine Scarry in her ground breaking book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985). Scarry sketches out what might be termed a phenomenology of pain and imagination, which I will claim can be generalised across the historico-existential field of black diasporic experience. In Scarry's account, extreme physical pain is posited as a primary model for thinking about knowledge and power,

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unmaking and creation, voice and soma, identity and its denial, representation and non-representation, visibility and invisibility. In other words, Scarry's account can be used to articulate a pervasive condition of black diasporic agents. In the midst of existential dread, diasporic black communities have worked on their bodies to reveal and combat the truths of their circumstances. Against global economic deprivation, hetero-patriarchal constraint, the ongoing consequences of the history of slavery, neo-colonialism, the violence of class inequality and Christian conservatism, diasporic black people have used the very vehicle of positioning as a resource to contest their social status in their struggle to keep alive viable modes of being. In such circumstances, 'survival' transcends the conventional crisis-vocabulary of basic need or environmental limitation. Rather, 'survival' refers to desire and the limits of the imagination and the deepest reserves of the psyche. Prior to merely physical need, survival is *ontological*. Survival concerns the affirmation of being in the face of denial and the threat of annihilation. In the context of the Jamaican poor, survival involves trying to get beyond social death, trying to transcend the legacy of slavery, to derive meaning in a context of meaninglessness. Survival implies the attempt to fuse the metaphysical, the spiritual and the existential in a way that allows diasporic black people to assert themselves (Nettleford, personal interview 1999). This has created a situation where black diasporic agents continuously 'imagine an undominated fruition and to live within existing dominations equipped with a determination to do more than survive' (Simone 1989: 158).

I will argue that the sheer desire to tame and conquer the subtle horrors of black life is one of the impulses that animates and motivates creativity and the continuation of the



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forms of African expressive practices in the diasporic context. In a socio-historical field characterised by the trauma and brutality of global white capitalist supremacy, people of the black diaspora have responded (and are forced to respond) in terms of the creative imagination. The engine of this creative response is the corporealised imagination. As I suggested in the introduction, it seems that there must be something other than the theorisation of power and the modes of resistance to it. The vulnerability of merely *resisting* power is that that resistance will become reactive - unwittingly reproducing the oppressive legacies of power by internalising its frame of reference. However, if power is viewed initially as capacity and as empowerment, rather than as imposition, this leads to a creative response that transcends the often restrictive and implicitly annihilating conditions that authority places upon the marginalised. In this way, hegemonic power is not first of all resisted; rather, the frame of reference is itself negotiated or refused because its terms do not reflect entirely the norms and practices of the marginalised groups. This is a heady refusal that requires strength, commitment and bravery. In the first instance, such responses require *creativity* and an impassioned imaginative capacity to think "outside the box" of the terms of reference of oppressive power itself.

Through the practices and processes of embodied imagination - music, dance, sports, gestures, speech, religion, fashion, humour, culinary practices - black diasporic agents engage with trace-structures of African expressive practice which accommodate continuity and experimentation. These preferences impact on how we think about black agency. Thus, in the context of socio-political disregard for black humanity and urban marginalisation, the body's imagination engenders various responses: subversion,

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perversion, addiction, vulgarisation *and* immense creativity. Through the rest of this chapter, I will show how such cultural practices as adornment, the fetishisation of the body and 'the most staggering excesses' can sit comfortably with 'the most exacting physical discipline and assertion of will' (Ralph Ellison 1962: 230). In other words, I will show how the apparent antinomies of excess and discipline occur characteristically side by side in different forms of black diasporic expression.

### **A Phenomenology of Pain and Imagination**

#### ***The Embodied State of Being-in-Pain***

An aspect of the existential context of black experience can be summarised in terms of what Gilroy has referred to as the ontological 'condition of being in pain' (1993: 293). Rather than being merely a physical condition, we need to understand that pain involves an alteration of the subject's world and powers of agency. Elaine Scarry argues that the body's pain resists linguistic objectification. This resistance to language is linked to pain's lack of referential content in the external world. Most psychic, perceptual and somatic states allude to an object in the world: 'as desire is desire of *x*, fear is fear of *y*, hunger is hunger for *z*; but pain is not "of" or "for" anything - it is itself alone' (Scarry 1985: 162). Physical pain is however unique. It admits no object, making it unshareable. In the absence of externalisation, there is no other reality besides the intransitive cruelty of the pain. As a state, pain is thoroughly of the body. Its presence returns the body's experience to that primal moment prior to language, agency, meaning, culture, and



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subjectivity. As such, 'the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be *verbally represented*', Scarry writes, 'also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be *politically represented*' (ibid: 12).

For Scarry, the difficulty of articulating the body's pain has political and perceptual consequences, especially when the human body is appropriated for and conflated with debased forms of power (ibid: 14) such as torture and war. According to Scarry, voice and soma are inseparable: a fact intrinsic to the effects of war and torture. To inflict pain and simultaneously elicit information from the tortured is to participate in the diminution of their world. Intense bodily pain is language and world destroying. To be in intense pain is to occupy a position of incarnate silence, 'to have one's sphere of extension contracted down to the small circle of one's immediate physical presence' (ibid: 207). This contrasts with the situation of the powers *behind* the torture. Here, the voice of authority, working through the victim in appropriating his or her speech, is displaced, disembodied and afforded agency, self-extension and limitlessness. As Scarry writes,

To have a body is to be describable, creatable, alterable and woundable.

To have no body, to have only a voice is to be none of these things: it is to be the wounder but not oneself woundable, to be the creator or the one who alters but oneself neither creatable nor alterable. [...] Consequently, to be intensely embodied is the equivalent of being unrepresented and (here as in many secular contexts) is almost always the condition of those without power. (1985: 206 - 7)

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Scarry's phenomenology of pain raises the question of mapping the limits of agency. Does her account suggest that to be in intense pain is to experience psychic implosion without any redress in the direction of expression? Does pain of this kind reduce its victim to being absolutely abject and passive? Is pain always experienced as absolute negation or are there ways of subduing or superseding it? How can pain be brought out from the silent and silenced body into shared objectification? How can a violated body become a defiant, cherished body?

### *A Prelude to a Kiss*

For Scarry, pain's intransitivity is not *absolutely* a negation of agency; rather, it is its very objectlessness that can give rise to imagining, resistance and the conditions for creation and the gathering of the fragmented body. The *imagination* is therefore offered as pain's only object: 'While pain is a state remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being the only state that is wholly its objects' (Scarry 1985: 162). Structured through objects, the imagination allows for pain to be transposed outside of itself and to be projected onto cultural artefacts. Through projection onto an object, the body's pain can quit the interior landscape of the body. The imagination therefore supplies the ecstatic structure of transcendence from the body denied by pain and suffering.

For example, for those in acute famine regions, imagining food or water across the border may act as an imperative to move towards the source of food. Again, within Jamaican



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dancehall culture, the insufferability of life and its structural constraints push women to try to combat limitations and deprivations through the discipline of dancing and the excess of bodily adornment in what the Sufi underground anarchist Hakim Bey calls a "temporary autonomous zone" (Bey 1991) of corporeal imagination. The intensity of pain is thus temporarily abated. Therefore, 'state and object co-exist as ongoing counterparts' (Scarry 1985: 167). That is, the object (food, tools, companion) directly eliminates or releases in part some of the aversive intensity of the state/sensation (hunger, injury, loneliness) as the afflicted work towards alleviating their suffering. Imagination can therefore act as "a prelude to a kiss" (Duke Ellington), a prelude to the transformation of an existential situation. Rex Nettleford (1985) has argued that by drawing on the imaginative intellect, enslaved and colonised black people constructed an alternative world-view separate from their enslavers. They mobilised collectively to produce change, to outwit their oppressors and wage successful rebellions that have shaped the present. He further notes that these rebellions and modes of resistance have taken various forms, from open revolt, artistic creativity to eschatological return.

In the same way, the generic body in pain (or "Babylon" as it is spatialised in the imaginary of Rastafarian discourse) becomes the source of creative redemptive territorial or imaginative return, and the overture to the construction of disruptive practices and fantastical dreams. As noted in previous chapters, there is a logic or structural dynamic between this condition of Babylon and what gets created or imagined. It is no mere accident that fantasies of redemption arise in the midst of existential dread. For diasporic Africans, the imagination has therefore been and continues to be an important site for



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rejuvenation, re-memory and self-actualisation. The imagination is a *practice* in the reinvention and assertion of an alternative way of being; and a *process* that allows the black body in pain to begin to move away and beyond its suffering and hurt. At the same time, the agent can eschew the authoritative, epistemic and politico-economic structures that reproduce oppression by drawing from endlessly mutating cultural traditions. The active process of imagining is a path towards self-objectification that establishes the path of collective action, self-preservation and empowerment.

Although each other's missing counterpart, pain and the imagination still operate solipsistically at the level of the individual. This is however overcome through *work*. For Scarry, work<sup>1</sup> can be synonymous with both pain and creation, as it involves and engages both the holistic (physical and psychological) body in action. Through work the circuits of interiority associated with pain and imagination collapse, producing and materialising objects that had only being previously imagined. For instance a new dance, a style of walking, a cultural pattern is brought into our midst, through the *work* of the imagination and the *imagination* of work. In this way, work becomes the form of redemption. Although imagination is of the intentional individual, the structure of

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<sup>1</sup> Scarry is however aware of the different situations that pushes the attributes of work towards the negating fact of pain and the more positive aspect of work through the creation of artifacts used in constructing a world. Scarry writes: 'The more it realizes and transforms itself in its object, the closer it is to the imagination, to art, to culture; the more it is unable to bring forth an object or, bringing it forth, is then cut off from its object, the more it approaches the condition of pain. So as an example of the one extreme, is the fact that the collective artifacts of civilization - its painting, poems, buildings - are habitually referred to individually as "works". Indicative of the opposite extreme is the fact that historical moments when work has been identified with suffering have been moments in which those persons performing the activity of work have been separated from the benefits of the objects that are the products of that activity. Slavery, whether occurring in ancient Egypt or in the nineteenth-century American South, was an arrangement in which physical work was demanded of a population whose members were themselves cut off from ownership, control, and enjoyment of the products they produced. So, too, the nineteenth-century British factory world is one in which work is described as approaching the condition of pain' (Scarry 1985:170)



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making real or the actualisation of the imagined object is essentially a collective act grounded in the desire to fulfil communal values. It is also part of a continuing negotiation between collective socio-cultural practices and the fields of possibility opened up in the encounters with others. Perhaps an individual might have imagined a new dance movement, as in the dancehall dance 'Bogle' coined after Bogle, a member of the famous dancehall posse, the Black Roses Crew, and an energetic choreographer of dancehall dances. However, the way a dance such as the Bogle gets taken up is always collective. This is because as a dance Bogle is incomplete: it is only one component of a wider choreography of movement available to the dancers. Bogle gets taken up and (re)incorporated within the structure of a wider repertoire of movement which is a product of local and trans-local relations, continuity and experimentation. Therein lies its power, beauty and innovation. African diasporic communities insist on the collective effort; the creativity of an individual working within and as part of the group is actively encouraged. Imagined objects or movements are therefore only comprehensible within a web of interconnecting relations which provide the impetus for their transmission and transformation across space and time. In this way, cultural artefacts are not the exclusive creation of an individual or selected 'genius', but the production of collective relations that continually spawn new forms of the previous archetype. The living body of tradition is ruptured and renewed through the passage of time. For Scarry, as within the black diaspora, creativity is the means to redemption from suffering and affliction.

Scarry's thesis on the phenomenology of pain raises pertinent questions for the argument I want to develop here. If we are to understand the significance of the *performing* black

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female body in dancehall culture, how can we attend to the historical and existential situation that forms and informs the female body in this culture, without undermining the place of pleasure and erotic expression in the women's life? Or, to put it the other way, how can the pleasure of the body in dancehall be understood without losing sight of the conditions of pain and oppression out of which it arises?

In this chapter I will suggest that the positioning and use of the body in this culture must be seen as both an attempt to give expression to unarticulated pain and the need for social recognition denied by Eurocentric cultural values of the middle and upper class Jamaicans. Women in dancehall refuse the questioning frameworks of authority referred to above, opening the "sub-culture" to non-reactive modes of expression. Somatic power is used to contest the silences surrounding female sexuality and the atrocities that have been and continue to be committed against the black female body. In stating the situation in this way I do not wish here to perpetuate the orthodoxy whereby the black female diaspora is *solely* structured and determined by oppression and victimisation through the signifier of the body. On the contrary, the thrust of the argument here is to show how the underclass and the working poor in (urban) Jamaica attempt to bring creative expressions to bear on their experience of pain, negation and oppression by working with it, recycling it, and transforming it so that it becomes a source of power (bell hooks 1991: 8). Thus, through a combination of place (the dancehall), practice (dance, display, kinaesthetic attitude) and imaginative modes of embodiment (adornment), I will suggest that existential and phenomenological pain is eroticised, re-membered and re-figured as joy.



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What I want to do now is to suggest that Scarry's thesis can be *generalised* and is existentially present in situations other than war and torture. There lies a myriad of circumstances both historically and in the present where a politico-historical-institutional matrix leads to conditions of suffering and pain. In particular, I shall begin to suggest that the black diasporic body exists by and large in conditions of affliction and suffering which create a situation of hopelessness, despair and dread. However, in line with Scarry, I will also suggest that the pain of black diasporic circumstance is not absolute. In fact, this very condition generates the exigency to express suffering and acts as the grounding for non-reactive imaginative and creative transcendence.

### **From Existential Dread to Pain Avenue**

Through a focus on Jamaican dancehall culture, I will show how black women transform and are transformed by the flexing inflection of their bodies in an erotic recognition and celebration of community, tradition, memory and the absurdity of life. But first, I must ask, what do we mean by diasporic black pain? In this thesis the factors for black pain I refer to are not discrete, nor can they be isolated under one schema. Rather, they form a web or matrix which is articulated, organised and experienced differently in each diasporic location and across time. There is no pre-determined effect or response or name for the sets of factors that combine to create a feeling of pain and existential dread among black people. Global white supremacy has a thousand faces, not one of which fully captures the phenomenon in its entirety. The factors which frame or structure black pain are so thoroughly intertwined that any attempt to present a single causal reason leads

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to a multitude of other factors. For example, economic concerns are intimately related to material circumstances, which are themselves entwined within cultural frameworks, which are themselves related to an evolving discursive history which is linked to the mediating power of what is conveyed by the epidermis (Fanon 1967). However, what we *can* say is that one of the factors which produces black pain - white supremacist thinking and practice - has 'become deeply embedded in [...] cultural and institutional beliefs and practices' (Hayes 1996: 18), travelling beyond the borders of the Western metropolis to infect the world. These can and do have powerful decisive effects on the capacity of black people to exist in the fullness of their corporeal being. Lewis Gordon has argued that what he calls 'anti-black racism' has such a devastating effect on the everyday life world of all black people that class mobility does not mediate it or provide sanctuary against its viciousness and violence:

as much as the black middle and upper classes may try to identify with being bourgeoisie, their situation of being over-determined from the outside confronts them everyday: department store monitors, police officers who stop them for driving too slow, frightened white colleagues in elevators, white control over key segments of the private sector, purported acceptance "in spite of their color," "exceptionalism" in terms of their race, and so on. (1995: 179-80)

Moreover, not only do black diasporic subjects have to deal with the 'psychic wounding inflicted by racist aggression' (hooks 1995: 135) but they also have to come to grips with



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their own private and internal existential anguish and torment. The episodic private misery and pain common to all human beings is the outcome of the anxieties and vulnerabilities brought on by the inescapable fear and fact of the aloneness, mystery and the force of birth, love, and death (Baldwin 1962: 316). Of course, black people are frightened by the tragedy of life just like everyone else and strive to conquer it. It is therefore necessary that any discussion of black pain must address how both outer violence and inner fear combine to produce 'feelings of overwhelming powerlessness and despair [...] in the psyches of black folks' (hooks 1995: 137).

So, rather than trying to point at a particular regime of torture or exploitation, in the case of black people, the figure of Scarry's torturer is depersonalised and gets spread across the field of socio-cultural, sexual, economic, historical forces. The existential situation in the contemporary black scene is one of a suffused torture and anguish, where the devastating reality of "racist reasoning" (Gilroy 1987: 11) and practice continue to define, delimit, and disfigure all aspects of black social existence (Hayes 1996: 18). Black people continue to live under conditions which persistently challenge, inhibit, and threaten selfhood, agency, and the capacity to create a meaningful and viable self-representation outside the culture and discourse of absolute negation. Fanon's account of the colonial regime in *The Wretched of the Earth* suggests that self-negation was an essential part of colonial domination:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted

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logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (1961: 169)

For Scarry, to be represented is to have an incarnate present. Feminists and theorists of the black diaspora have argued that in Western iconography, women and black people are materially over-represented and associated with pure physicality and biology. In contrast, white middle class men are able to circumvent corporeality through the acquisition of voice, in equal measure as the colonised or oppressed groups are reduced and relegated to the embodied silence. In this way, those conceived as irrefutably embodied are visibly marked out for enslavement, oppression, cultural manipulation, distortion and are made the source of hierarchical classification of human worth (Mercer 1987, Spelman 1990). However, as Scarry has noted and the argument here is emphasising, no condition of suffering and oppression is ever passively accepted. Black people persistently make efforts to give expression and bring resolution to their pain through 'the construction of new cultural alternatives, in which identity is created and re-created as part of an ongoing and dynamic process' (Alexander 1996: 18). As Cornel West (1982) is keen to point out, the African-American church has long been a source of redemptive community and care for those afflicted by American white supremacy and what Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972) in another context have called the *hidden injuries of class*. Nonetheless, the black diaspora continues to engage in 'endless struggles over the definition of what their lives and blackness will mean' (Simone 1989: 158). Unfortunately, expressions to externalise pain are often misnamed as 'black rage' or as madness and cannibalised (Fanon 1961). Such cannibalisation of black pain acts to



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deny the 'effects that racialising practices have had and continue to have on social life' (Alcoff 1999: 32).

In his essay 'Notes of a Native Son', James Baldwin wrote: 'I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent and further that past will remain horrible for as long as we refuse to accept it honestly' (1955: 376). In this passage, Baldwin is calling for an historical understanding of the present. The past Baldwin directs us to is 'the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone' (ibid: 376). Through the temporal intertwining of past and present through historical understanding, Baldwin proposes that the contemporary painful present of the black situation is seen as a form of repetition and continuance - rope and fire in a different guise. When we look at the contemporary situation of the black diaspora, we see a corresponding temporal intertwining. The endless suffering and oppression of the present repeats and returns the black body to that inaugural entry into the modern world system - slavery and colonisation - through the differentiations of history. Black people's lives continue to be under-valued, over-determined by lack and a series of negativities that conspire to deny black humanity; a denial of the right to exist in and beyond the surface of the epidermal, a form of bad faith (Gordon 1995).

Once existential pain is seen up close, Scarry's thesis about the effects and responses to pain becomes more pertinent still in terms of the black diasporic situation. For example, the continued value placed on skin colour as an important aspect of social mobility still

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exerts its own peculiar influence and particular form of violence on the psyche of Jamaicans (Douglas 1992, Barnes 1999). Although class is an important social distinction in Jamaica, this is often articulated 'through the idiom of colour shade and can reflect biologized notions of race' (Austin-Broos 1994: 218). Class, colour/race, and gender in combination constitute what Austin-Broos has called 'Jamaica's discourse of heritable identity' (ibid: 218). This discourse of heritable identity perpetuates and reproduces the cultural logic of plantation society, wherein upper class white values and morality dominate the socio-cultural and economic landscape till the present. Norman C. Stolzoff's recent work on dancehall culture bears this out. Stolzoff argues that while the black lower classes constitute the main producers and consumers of dancehall culture:

[the] upper echelons of dancehall production are controlled by white, Asian, and racially mixed middle-class and upper-class men, the middle rungs by brown and black middle-class men (with a few powerful women as well), and the lower strata by black lower-class men (with women filling well-defined positions subordinate to men). (Stolzoff 2000: 116)

Dissatisfied with the continued legacy of plantocracy, many lower class Jamaicans have become more vocal and confrontational about 'the failure of the postcolonial promise to give black people their symbolic and material due after centuries of colonial domination' (Barnes 1999: 287). This is expressed most keenly in the arena of cultural output among lower class Jamaicans: music and dance. The "rhythm of social life" (Henry 1997: 159) glimpsed from these rich and vital cultural forms, indicates that the existential situation of



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many Jamaicans is desperate and worsening. Their lives are over-determined by lack and a series of impoverishments that violates the order of existence and autonomy. Social markers of progress and well-being such as economy and education, wealth and health, employment and housing and protection from violence continue to be a beautiful dream deferred as Jamaica is violently and unequally plunged into the global economic system under the benevolence of the great White fathers: the World Bank, IMF, WTO, and other elite neo-colonial institutions (Harrison 1997, Antrobus 1989). Because of inappropriate social planning by the Jamaican government as well as gang-organised clients of the two major political parties - PNP and JLP - the policies introduced have created a situation where terror, poverty, mass apathy, police brutality and dehumanising practices are the order of the day (Lacey 1977, Eyre 1986). This situation, coupled with a historical denial and violation of black existence, has helped to foster a condition where oppression, anxiety, distress and dread are the cosmic dance of everyday life.

Is it any wonder that Rastafarians will claim "dread" (Chevannes 1995, Friday 1983) as a subjective and objective affirmation of their existential condition and its transcendence? According to Paget Henry the term "dread" describes 'the experience and conquest of a certain of kind of terror [...] the unjust and impersonal conventions of Jamaican society that threaten the identity of many of its members with insignificance' (1997b:158). In a world where anti-black racism continues to malign the soul and infect and inflect other social relations in the Caribbean (as elsewhere in the black diaspora), "existence in black" (Gordon 1995) is still informed by this consciousness. As Spillers writes,

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Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated",[...] the dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (1987: 68)

As already noted, Scarry distinguishes the experience of physical pain from other sentient states in that it is intransitive and has no object. The real import of Scarry's work in terms of the project of this thesis is that it articulates the experience of generalised oppression for black people. Diasporic pain is intransitive because it has no delimitable object or discrete manifested source. Rather, the matrices of white supremacy, gender and class relations, lead to a ubiquitous field of inequalities whose start and end is impossible to discern. Thus, the pain of inequality has no object, or rather, it is 'anonymous' 'showing itself in endless disguise' (Spillers 1987: 68). For instance, when a problem exists in the world -let's call this problem x - there is an attempt to analyse and understand the problem. A set of solutions are suggested, one of which - y - is agreed to be the best possible solution given the nature of x. In this way external problems can be localised and resolved. In the case of pain however, Scarry's argument is that no such x exists in any discrete form. Therefore, no such y can exist. The situation is therefore *prima facie* hopeless. In the same way, ingrained structural racial, sexual or class oppression (of either the subtle or unsubtle kind) is without x and therefore without y because it is part



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of the pattern of everyday life. Even in the case of candidates for x being suggested (like a Paul Condon or the Metropolitan police, or the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), slavery, or bourgeois ideology) each of these localisations carry with it the dangerous assumption that if a policy or response of 'y' is adopted then a general solution will emerge. Such a perspective fails to acknowledge something like Stuart Hall's idea of the different modality in which race is structured, and how different modalities - class, gender, generation, region etc. - affect the bodily experience of being-in-the-world.

It is the very nature of oppression that its ubiquity admits of no location. Any discrete example of racial oppression is, in fact, merely a *symptom* of an underlying dynamic of injustice embedded in the life-world of the perpetrators and victims alike. Echoing Paulo Freire, Audre Lorde writes that 'the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us' (1984:123). To focus only on the oppressor or on individual cases and solutions is therefore to distract attention from the more fundamental nature of the problem: our complicity in its reproduction. For instance, although the Metropolitan Police might accept that there is institutionalised racism within its ranks in the aftermath of the Stephen Lawrence enquiry, we should not be deluded into thinking that racism is finally localised through this admission. A host of explanations can be located for the cause of pain; the fact is that, whatever causal explanations are offered will be insufficient, unless attention is paid to their reproduction. As Raymond Smith argues, black suffering and anguish 'is not caused by slavery but by the forces that reproduce the social systems established after slavery' (1992: 257).

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It is at this point that black existential pain most closely resembles Scarry's pain as hopeless, internal and without object. Moreover, in this situation the victim of white supremacy colludes with the white fantasy that the oppression is of the black subject's own doing, having "a chip on their shoulder" is mirrored by internal objectless anger. It is at this stage of redoubled alienation - experiencing conditions of oppression and then internalising them - that we can begin to comprehend in more detail how Scarry's point about disempowerment as a response to pain operates in the black existential context. In the condition of hopelessness, with no discrete set of remedial actions available, the rejection from the world that Fanon (1952) expresses so eloquently rebounds onto the subject as an all-pervasive form of powerlessness. As nothing can change the way of the world, the very *point* of change itself is rendered futile and meaningless. In this condition there appears to be no longer any rational motive for action that can get a grip on the ubiquity of the problem. It is thus that we begin to see the social problems that blight black diasporic communities in truly *existential* terms. Rather than a depressingly long series of statistics or reports, the conditions of oppression *as a form of embodied experience* are understood in terms of the negation of the possibility for critical and creative resistance and positive constructive strategies.

However, as has been stressed all along, any account of the phenomenology of black pain will remain incomplete without a corresponding account of the continuous and persistent efforts to assert and express the agency of black humanity. Simone has argued that to focus solely on black pain without acknowledging



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the many ways the Black World continues to replenish and nurture itself becomes simply another means of denying its value, thinking, and feeling. As such, [...] citations of exploitation exists as another manifestation of a racial apparatus that diminishes the applicability of black cultural productions to white lives. (1989: 158)

Black people are not and have never been absolutely powerless in the face of their sociological and existential situation. The very condition of pain and misery generates the exigency to create alternative, viable and meaningful individual and collective expressions, and a sense of self outside of, in relation to, and beyond the history and daily experience of oppression. Making this point does not involve romanticisation: for every mode of redemption there is self-inflicted abuse in the black diasporic community - addiction, black-on-black violence, vulgar materialism, self-hatred and, perhaps most insidiously, the epistemological crime of ignorance - about black history and culture. In many ways, these afflictions are still not forms of passivity - they are rather signs of black agency gone awry. It is as if the imagination has responded to the crisis of selfhood imposed by white supremacy by being infected with it.

It is at this point that we can begin to see how formal aspects of retention have proved to be significant somatic resources in the struggle against existential deprivation. An important part of the effort to assert and confirm the active capacity of black embodied agency has been the role played by creative expressions, in the form of ritualised

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performances of daily life, or rhythmic gestural patternings. Rather than black creative expression being gathered necessarily around the romantic heroism of revolutionary fervour, I want to suggest that the most active response against black pain take place at the level of embodied *everyday life* and *practices*. It is thus that the formal elements of African practice begin to be explained within the context of a collective existential pain. As I will argue in a moment, it is within the rhythm of the demotic that resistance is brewed, stirred, and delivered. We can observe this in the stylisation of the body's movement, gesture, speech pattern, adornment and habits of being-in and taking-up space. Resistance and creativity are instilled and distilled within the patterns of ritualised daily routine or habitual existence that might go unnoticed in the pass-over of life. Everyday life as a form of black resistance should not be viewed as a form of levelled off blind following, but as a form of re-identification and re-situation on its route to new forms.

To combat oblivion and insignificance, we see and hear the cries of the urban poor articulating the conditions of the Jamaican body in pain. Whether this is the I-and-I of Rastafarian affirmation of individual and collective existence, or the dancehall clashes between bodies in motion, or words travelling at the speed of bullets, we see attempts to heal the traumatised body, to proclaim and affirm the body's potential for creativity and joy. We begin to see Scarry's point: in every situation where the voice of power and authority tries to muffle the voice of the body in pain, the pained body makes efforts to move away from the silence of the afflicted. In Jamaica as elsewhere, black diasporic



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agents make use of their own corporeal power. The work of the imagination engenders resistance and redemption beyond the epistemic frame of discursive power structures.

### **Dancehall Culture: An Expression of Diasporic Creativity**

#### *Contextualising Dancehall Culture*

Dancehall refers to the actual physical space in which the guttural ghetto pulse of ragga music is performed. Ragga music is reggae's grittier, tougher, meaner offspring. This music is played either in an open air space with a stage and sound system or within an enclosed space. Dancehall is also a generic term for a whole array of cultural phenomena that emerged in the 1980s till the present that includes music (locally called "dancehall" or internationally, "ragga") and that inspired fashion, film, food, drink attitude and even language (Francis-Jackson 1995). The key organising factor in dancehall is the social event of going to a dance (as is generally called "sessions" or "bashment"). Here, different posses of DJs, Selectors and their sound systems compete with each other in what is known in Jamaica as "clashes". It is on these occasions that fashion, music and attitude re-work themselves according to the very latest styles - of movement, adornment and song. The centrality of the intertwining of place and the body as figuring and re-figuring human activities is therefore accentuated in the term "dancehall"; both the grounding for the body and its *raison d'être*. The dancehall complex returns the body to its ground, its reason, and its sensual materiality: music (aural), adornment (visual), dancers "bubble" together or navigating through the crowd (touch), sweaty bodies and

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drugs (taste). The culture is one of homage to the body and the power of place to support the body, its desires and creativity. The dancehall offers a cultural space in which participants can momentarily escape the misery and violence of daily life. However, it should be noted that dancehall does not always provide a safe space for its participants. As Tracey Skelton notes, 'gang feuds often spill over into the space of the dance and the police may "invade" at any time and carry out random body searches and arrest' (1998 146).

The near inexpressibility of pain to which Scarry refers, together with the growing dissatisfaction and disillusion with the abject poverty and violence which persistently wreaks havoc on Jamaicans, and the desire to assert and to claim agency in a social context that looks at them with indifference, manifests itself in a unique way in this culture. The struggle to integrate voice and soma gains full expression and gathers momentum in the performance of pain and pleasure in dancehall culture as performers and audience engage in a reading and re-reading of the Jamaican body-politic through the erotics of the carnal. Michel Serres writes that we 'all come to dance in order to read without speaking, to understand without language' (1995:40). Here, the singing voice and the dancing body, alongside the pained and defiant body, engage in a secret dialogue that is 'at once banal and profound' (Lefebvre 1991: 395), where instructions to move in a certain way are responded to by bodies which further incite and excite the DJs in a round-dance of phono-somatic affirmation.



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The unification of voice and soma that spits out from the gutters of Kingston ghettos is an articulation of lives that refuse to be defeated by poverty, violence, and the pseudo-Victorian watchful eye of middle-class moral norms. In its place excessive forms of adornment, song and dance engender a healing balm to soothe the blows of dereliction. Writing over thirty years ago on "rudies" (the precursor to contemporary dancehallers), Garth White wrote that, 'dance provides relaxation which takes the form of a muscular orgy, in which the most acute aggressiveness and the most impelling violence are carnalized, transformed and conjured away' (1967: 42). Within dancehall culture, dancing is a way of releasing tension and pressure, constituting and asserting being-in-the world in a society that looks down at the producers and consumers of this culture with indifference, indignation, and contempt. This guttural form of expression offers one of the few means of voicing/dancing the conditions of oppression at a time when the masses had become disillusioned with the post-colonial promise of a better life.

In the 1980s a new wave of change swept through Jamaica. The democratic socialist administration of Michael Manley finally gave way to Edward Seaga's neo-liberal free enterprise government amidst much political violence that accompanied the campaigns, stirred up as in Latin America by the CIA. Seaga wasted no time in delivering Jamaica into the hands of Western Banks, the United States government and other international institutions such as the IMF. In so doing, Seaga's administration accepted all the stringent measures advocated by the World Bank and IMF and restored 'the military and economic foundations of U.S. superiority [...] incorporating the Caribbean Basin countries into the U.S. military-industrial complex' (Deere et al cited in Harrison 1997:

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456). The previously nationalised industries were de-nationalised, there were drastic cutbacks in public employment and social programmes, price regulations and food subsidies were abolished, free trade zones were created, the national currency was devalued, the power of trade unions were undermined and production was geared towards exports (Antrobus 1989). This situation exacerbated the living conditions of the majority of Jamaicans and was reflected in the increase in unemployment, dramatic rise in costs of living and reduction in government expenditure on social services (ibid: 20). The social consequences of this included a boom in international drug trafficking, widespread use of guns, drug abuse and violence, including violence against women.

According to Stolzoff, the changes in the political-economy were also mirrored in the socio-cultural sphere. The masses were encouraged to reject everything associated with Michael Manley and the 1970s. This invariably led to the rejection of the Rastafarian inspired reggae. With its radical critique of global capitalism, its chronicle of the poverty and deprivation of masses of Jamaicans and its connection to the suffering of blacks all over the world, together with its biblical celebration and call for a return to the African motherland, reggae no longer held its power for the generation disillusioned and traumatised during the upheavals of the seventies (Fairweather-Wilson 1994). Furthermore, unlike reggae's fusion of American R&B and soul music with Caribbean rhythms and instrumentation, the new dancehall style favours more sophisticated digital recording, remixing and sampling. DJs "skanking" or "toasting" over dub plates in Jamaican patois came to embody this new change. The music of resistance in reggae that found such strong international resonance was replaced in the late 1970s and early 1980s



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with the locally grounded phenomena of dancehall DJs and mobile sound systems, historically an important part of Jamaican popular culture. Although in the 1980s, ragga DJs continue to be social commentators, with increasing unemployment, ghettoisation and social violence, the DJs became more introspective and retreated to more local concerns. They narrowed down their interest from politics and spiritual redemption to topics of materialism, sexuality, the gunplay of gangsterism, hedonism and their own verbal prowess (Stolzoff 2000, Cooper 1993). This was the moment when Jamaica's popular culture moved away 'from the militant confrontations and dreams of paradise in Africa and towards having the best time possible in the here and now - that is in the dancehall' (Stolzoff 2000: 99). Ironically, this movement away from Afrocentric discourse in speech was accompanied by a movement *towards* African tropes of bodily retention by dispensing with the strictures of Christian morality through dance movements, and towards African tropes of polyrhythm via indigenous folk music. This shift in popular culture also marked a linguistic shift - away from the intelligible English of reggae towards the less obviously discernible patois inflections of the ghetto. This retreat to the local and folkloric should not however be viewed as a gesture of insularity or ethnic absolutism, as is often claimed by critics lamenting the overthrow of the internationalism and diasporic black solidarity of reggae music (e.g. Gilroy 1987). Rather, I suggest that we view it as a transformative return to Jamaican folkloric culture. Ragga music borrowed the rhythms of Afro-Jamaican religion - Pocomania and Kumina - and the musical forms of mento and burru using drum machines. When the musicologist Kenneth Bilby asked Wayne Armond of the Kingston based reggae band Chalice where Jamaican popular music was moving, he had this to say:

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What it is encompassin' is very old Jamaican music - mento, Poco, you know, all the ethnic music from early Jamaica, only this is now being played on a drum machine, but the influences are valued [...] You hear them in dancehall music. Not the old Studio One beats, further back than that. Before reggae, before even the advent of ska or rock steady, I'm talking about the things they call burru, way, way back from my great-grandfather in slavery days, that's what we are talking about. (1997: 32)

This cultural-historical-linguistic shift within popular culture disturbed relations between class conflict on the island and Jamaican cultural exports. Instead of reggae, which the middle class and light-skinned Jamaicans came to accept as part of Jamaican national culture and its biggest cultural export, ragga music and its offshoots in fashion and dance were perceived by uptownies<sup>2</sup> as the antithesis of culture and civilisation. For Cooper, the sound that emanates from the DJs and sound systems was seen by upper class Jamaicans and the foreign press as unintelligible and pure 'noise' (1993: 136). The unintelligibility of the words in ragga music together with the near-naked forms of female clothing and the overtly sexual movements of the dancers and entertainers further

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between uptown and downtown as a signifier of class is more complicated in urban reality even though Jamaicans tend to ignore the complexity and tend to talk more about social differentiation signaled by this division. For example, in Kingston there are areas of extreme poverty standing cheek-by-jowl with affluent suburbs. Uptown is the suburbs of Kingston and it is 'associated with such symbols as the ruling establishment, the government, official nationalism, Euro-American cosmopolitanism, mainstream Christian morality, a belief in education and hard work, respect for the older generations and a disdain for black lower classes' (Stolzoff 2000:231). Downtown refers to the inner city ghetto areas generally occupied by darker-skinned lower classes (but not always). It is associated with 'black nationalism, Afro-Jamaican culture, Rastafari, the informal economy, criminality, gangsterism, respect for the younger generation, and a disdain of uptown culture and political leadership' (ibid: 231).



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confirmed to the ruling elite, the cultural inferiority and immorality of the lower class (Stolzoff 2000). The comparison between ragga and reggae raises the possibility that just as reggae was initially seen by many upper class Jamaicans as vulgar, so too the ambivalence that dancehall produces for many Jamaicans gradually change to acceptance. Whatever the case, dancehall's position within Jamaican society is fundamental – all Jamaicans have an opinion about it. Stolzoff writes, 'dancehall is not only important to poor blacks, but central to the society as a whole, because Jamaicans of all races and classes define themselves in relation to it' (ibid: 6).

One way dancehall has aroused debates in Jamaica has been through the focus on and popularity of sexually explicit lyrics. Although within dancehall music there are songs about ghetto violence and critiques of debilitating social policies associated with the lyrical legacy of Bob Marley (Francis-Jackson 1995), songs which focus on the sexual/gender/ personal/fleshy existence dominate the genre. In a society that is still influenced by Christian puritanism and the sexual conservatism of Rastafarian ideology, dancehall music has responded antithetically with "slackness" - the celebration of sexuality and obscenity. It is heterosexism at its worst. However, slackness is not without contradiction. At its heterosexual best women's carnal beauty and economic agency are celebrated and at its worst devalued. 'Homosexuality is gloriously vilified in graphic excremental imagery' (Cooper 1993:142). Slackness is a somewhat aggressive and regressive mode of expression which underclass Jamaican DJs use to vent the miseries of existence and their exclusion from full participation in hegemonic masculinity and its attendant economic power. It is the voice of the urban poor, but it is a voice that

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is determined to silence the voice of other dispossessed and powerless groups in Jamaica, especially its marginalised homosexuals. Cooper has argued however, when located within the context of a profoundly puritanical society, the misogyny and homophobia becomes potentially subversive:

Slackness is potentially a politics of subversion. For Slackness is not mere sexual looseness - though it certainly is that. Slackness is a metaphorical revolt against law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency. It is the antithesis of Culture. (ibid: 141)

In an interview with Imani Tafari Ama, the Jamaican dub-poet, Mutabaruka argues that, far from being anti-establishment, dancehall slackness is pro-establishment, reflecting and reproducing the prevailing values of the dominant society: 'The lewdness, the downgrading of women, the slackness, materialism, gun violence. The establishment is not against any of these things that dancehall personifies' (1994: 8). While female erotic potentiality is celebrated in the lyrics and the discourse of sex is brought out in the open, its misogyny, glorification of violent eroticism and homophobia does not depart radically from the hetero-patriarchy of the wider society and conscious reggae. Thus, to see it as politically and culturally subversive is to fail to see how slackness functions at the expense of women and gay people. We need not view everything emanating from below as radical or subversive. To do so is to completely disregard the violent implication it has for other less fortunate groups and the ways in which it re-affirms and colludes with the



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very structures it challenges. It should, however, be noted that slackness is only one of many dancehall styles.

One of the problems of focusing on the *verbal* aspect of the culture is the tendency to overlook the *non-verbal*. With the exception of Stolzoff's recent book *Wake The Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (2000), rarely is attention paid to the performative, kinaesthetic aspect of the culture. In particular 'the body in dance and the dancefloor itself as a space of spectacle and display' has been neglected (Cooper 1993:5). Cooper suggests that this inattention to the non-verbal elements of the culture constitute a limitation in her own work. While the verbal aspect of the culture is important, it however privileges and perpetuates male activities and experience to the exclusion of women. In common with other cultural scenes, the focus on the *production* of dancehall music in most commentaries – the DJs, the promoters, the label owners etc. - is at the same time a focus on dancehall as a discursive phenomenon emerging from out of the men that control that production. What I find 'potentially subversive' is less what Cooper calls the 'verbal maroonage' of the DJ's manipulation of language than the presence of women in this culture who are flouting conventions and 'refusing to be civilised' (Beverley Skeggs 1994). Beyond an attention placed on ownership of or access to the means of production, I contend that women in dancehall possess a different form of power - that of creative autonomy expressed through vocal encouragement, adornment and highly stylised movement.

The focus on the verbal in analysis of dancehall culture has parallels with Richard Sennett's descriptions of the *symposium* of ancient Athens where women (except for

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concubines) were excluded. Not so dissimilar to the activities of DJs in dancehall, the symposium was an occasion where

Men prepared poems, jokes, and boasts [...] so that they could show off skills [...]. The balance between competition and camaraderie sometimes tipped out of control and the symposium degenerated into a violent brawl.  
(1994: 77)

Excluded from the male activities, Athenian women created a gynocentric space on the rooftop during the unofficial festival dedicated to the youthful god of sensual pleasure - Adonis. On the rooftop, women made anonymous contact with each other in a momentary lamentation and celebration of the carnal and the death of the king of female pleasure. They danced, drank, and sang for and with each other. During the Adonia, women shielded themselves from the eye of power and 'recovered their powers of speech, [and] spoke their desires' (ibid: 78). Unlike the symposia, which depended on the power of oratory, in the Adonia, women expressed themselves through their bodies. During the Adonia, *'dancing and drinking [took] the place of complaint, or of analysis of the condition of women in Athens* (my emphasis ibid:79/80).

Some of the principles operative in this festival are principles that are also important in everyday diasporic resistance: non-official, invisible, everyday forms of communion, involving tactile, ambulant bodies in motion at the margins of mainstream culture. I want to draw out three intertwined issues from this scene of antiquity that has relevance to dancehall culture.



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First, the space created by the women was neither a political space nor a 'launching pad for rebellion' (ibid: 80). Rather, it was a marginal space that women transformed into a safe, productive and alternative environment in which they 'momentarily and bodily stepped out of the conditions imposed on them by the dominant order of the city' (Sennett 1994:80). Although only temporary and marginal, the Adonia was nonetheless powerful. The space created here was not intentionally political or necessarily transformative of the social order. Rather, the Adonia concerned women responding emotionally and giving expression to their situation through their capacity to get in touch with their own eroticism. Because it was seen as politically insignificant, there was no attempt at civic suppression. Yet, these transgressive women made men uncomfortable. 'Contemporary writers like Aristophanes in the *Lysistrata* derided the sheer noisiness, wailing racket, and drunkenness of the event, treating with contempt women who had departed from their accustomed silence' (ibid: 79).

Secondly, cloaked in darkness, the festival of Adonia was not only an invisible space, it was also 'an anonymous, friendly territory' where women came together to communicate their desires and let themselves go in the community of strangers in the temporary autonomous zone of mutual affirmation. It is not an enduring autonomous zone, it is momentary and peripheral. In this invisible and marginalised territory, the power of *mythos* is celebrated over the privilege position ascribed to *logos* in the symposia<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Sennett a distinctive difference between *logos* and *mythos* is this: 'logos connects things...sets the stage for a person making connections: there is an audience judging the person arguing, and the audience is suspicious [...]. In all forms of logos, [...] the speaker is identified with his words; they belong to him and he is responsible for them.' Mythos on the hand does not require the speaker to be responsible for his or her words. Hence the Greek remark, "This is not my tale, but I have heard it elsewhere". The distinction between logos and mythos is played out in the carefully prepared speech of the

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Third, Adonia was a festival of female eroticism, sensual self-pleasuring and 'a celebration of desires not otherwise fulfilled in women's lives' (ibid: 77). Through the joy in dancing apart or together, women made love to and with the space they had created, to an ideal, absent-present lover (Adonis). In this zone, the Adonia lifted for a few nights, the restrictions and restraints normally exercised were abandoned.

### *The Space of Women*

Like Sennett's perspective on ancient Greece, I want to focus on the gynocentric aspect of dancehall culture. Recognising that the streets they live in have become a battle zone (Chevannes and Levy 1997), many underclass Jamaican women turn to the only thing they have rights over - their body. The black body that was a signifier for oppression now becomes a shield that wards off potential attackers, protecting them from the tyranny of official culture and ghetto violence as they call themselves into being. According to a commentator in the film *The Dark Side of Black* by the Isaac Julien, 'The body is being celebrated because the body is the only place where the powerless can exercise their power in a world indifferent to their suffering'. Women in dancehall have very limited access to the production of ragga music. Against this, through dance and vocal encouragement, women are able to control and shape the lyrical content of the music that in turn shapes the career and popularity of the DJs and their sound-systems. Cooper

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symposia and the freely uttered words of the unseen speaker at the rooftop. (81/82)



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notes one disgruntled male letter writer to the Jamaican *The Daily Gleaner* on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> January 1989:

A good show, until two DJs [...] displayed their vulgarity, and certain females, if I must call them so, jumped and shouted to their delight to hear certain sections of their body being described most disgracefully. The DJs were urged on by these women who had the most outrageous outfits that can ever be worn on the face of this earth. Something is definitely wrong. Could it be illiteracy or stupidity. (1993: 161)

As a social space, dancehall is therefore a place that inaugurates a different form of practice: a transgressive corporeal engagement. The dance or "session", and the female body in particular, came to embody upper class anxiety over the moral status of the of black lower class and the 'ongoing struggle over high culture and low, respectability and riot, propriety and vulgarity' (Cooper 2000: 350). Just as in late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe where femininity was divided between women considered modest and chaste (typically upper class) or vulgar and obscene (working class or black), a similar bifurcation operates in the Caribbean. The European upper class ideal is transplanted within uptown mores, with an accompanying aesthetic transfer - the ideal uptown look for Jamaican women is a *white* look: slender, restraint, calm, flowing long (straightened) hair. In the same way, the alignment of working class women and black women operative in the west described by Sander Gilman (1980) gets reproduced in Jamaica -

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both are derided as vulgar, uncontrollable and dangerous. Writing in the Jamaican newspaper *The Daily Gleaner*, Andre Fanon has this to say about dancehall:

Dance-hall becomes a danger when the dance-hall syndrome is made into a way of life [...]. Dance hall [...] under-develops our women who feel that they must learn to 'wine' and 'cock out' their posteriors as champion bubblers. Dance hall as a way of life emphasises the unproductive elements in society. If not channelled, dance hall will create a class of people which is incapable of doing anything productive. (1988: 14)

Many participants in this culture feel that the above reflects, yet again, upper class misunderstanding and intolerance of their culture (Walker 1994). As one of Walker's interviewees flatly stated: 'Dancehall is ghetto girl's entertainment [...] our nice time, it is our culture, our way of expressing ourselves, so nobody should care how we do it' (ibid:19). Although excluded, the black female body is reconstituted as a form of agency. Self-consciously vulgar, women flaunt their bodies in glorious recklessness, unperturbed by the image of the slender ideal that haunts every woman in occidental contemporary culture (and their uptown sisters); unmoved by Christian patriarchal righteousness and the discourse of reputation and respectability explored by the Caribbeanist Peter Wilson (1969). In her column in the *Gleaner*, Norma Soas writes,

For dancehall mavens there is no such thing as a "figure fault". Not for them are life-threatening diets, gruelling work-outs at the gym, or



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constricting corsets. They exhale with abandon. What some women remove with liposuction, the dancehalls expose, aided by spandex tights, cycle shorts and midriff tops, determined to let nature run its course. (1998:??)

These women freely expose and display physical excess with pride and playfulness, redefining it as a locus of beauty, power and sensuality. The exposure of female flesh, especially the ageing, fat, pregnant body, is considered grotesque, vulgar, unrestrained, dominates Jamaican society. According to Mary Russo (1986), to display the body (as dancehall women do), is to make a spectacle of oneself. It is precisely this spectacle that the women reclaim and valorise as they reject Middle class Jamaicans' acceptance of the 'White Western civilising system which attempts to contain the expression of women's sexuality through the moralising discourses of conduct: politeness, respectability, caring, duty and responsibility' (Skeggs 1994:108). Skeggs' description of the female rappers BWP (Bytches With Problems), who assert their sexual power and autonomy through what she calls the "demand discourse", has parallels with the self-confidence of dancehall women. They allow their bodies to speak their 'demand discourse' by displaying it, flaunting, exhibiting, flouting conventions, in order to publicly explore insatiable longings. In this self-conscious display of the body and the weaving of the body's story in motion, dancehall women powerfully subvert convention. This motile adornment raises ontological issues concerning active and passive agency. Some readers might view the display of the body in this culture as capitulating to that "Sadian imagination" (Carter 1979) which objectifies and exoticises the black female body in western culture. In

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contrast, I suggest that rather than seeing objectification as first of all the activity of the voyeur's gaze or imagination, it is more appropriate to say that it is a process that originates from the women involved. That is, women actively open and surrender themselves to the "eye of power" in a way that enables them to actively assert their subject position. In this way dancehall women expose and reveal 'spectatorial complicity in the production of objectified bodily images as well as culture's sexual politics and its double standards in the representation of women' (Czekay 1994:96). I suggest then that these women are aware of their objectification and they use their objectified state as a strategy to assert their subjectivity as they (re)construct themselves as embodied beings.

### *Consumption as a Matrix for Survival*

It has been said that women's greatest contribution to dancehall has been through fashion. The dances or "sessions" are the 'social space in which the smell of female power is exuded in the extravagant display of flashy jewellery, expensive clothes [and] elaborate hairstyles' (Cooper1993: 155). Clothing and consumption is part and parcel of what it means to survive, to have an identity, to occupy a position of prestige in a context of negation and social exclusion. Here, there are parallels with other forms of excessive survival in different settings. The case of the Congolese *Sapeur* (the cult of *haute couture* among the poor in the Congo) described by Jonathan Friedman (1994) is not so dissimilar to dancehall. In this case appearance *is* identity, and consumption is about self-maintenance:

Consumption is a life-and-death struggle for psychic and social survival



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and it consumes the entire person. If there is a fundamental desperation at the bottom of this activity it is perhaps related to the state of narcissistic non-being generated by a social crisis of self-constitution. (1994: 106)

With little financial means and no socio-economic status, dancehall women nevertheless outperform every other sector of Jamaican society in terms of the sheer extravagance of their adornment. In the face of death and the nihilism of their surroundings, something like Friedman's consumptive narcissistic non-being emerges with virulence. At work in Friedman's argument is a critique of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the definition of class-identity operating through distinctions in taste. In the case of the Sapeurs in the Congo and dancehall women, a far more destabilising dynamic is unleashed than one that merely acts to differentiate itself from the rest of society. The clothing and comportment of dancehall (as with the Sapeurs) threatens to jam the whole field of distinctions itself through strategies of vulgarised mimicry (of conventional conceptions of feminine comportment) and hybridisation. Paulette McDonald's description of women's fashion in this scene is worth quoting at length,

[...] women come out in outfits that show their bellies; they cut out holes at strategic parts in their shorts (called batty-riders in the language of Erotica); and they wear tight, body-hugging dresses with cut-out designs all the way up their armpits, suggesting that they have nothing on underneath [...]. It does not matter if the women are fat. Black-skinned women go in for blonde wigs. They dye their hair in a combination of

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colours - burgundy, green and orange. They wear chunky jewellery - earrings designed in the shape of the Jamaican map, a dollar sign, a razor blade. (1993: 8)

As with Friedman's analysis of the Sapeurs, the excessive consumption of dancehall women in terms of adornment therefore unfixes the taste boundaries of socio-economic distinction, creating a destabilising ambivalence that threatens and spreads across the whole field of distinction itself. Investment in adornment fits into a wider black diasporic cultural expression. Zora Neale Hurston has suggested that 'The will to adorn' constitutes 'the second most notable characteristic in Negro expression' (1933: 294). The will to adorn, she argues, is not an attempt to meet conventional standards, but to satisfy the soul of its creator (ibid: 294). Importantly for women in dancehall culture, it is a way of projecting their aesthetic judgement onto the world.

At first sight, the experience of women in dancehall culture appears to be strangely dislocated from the rest of Jamaican society. It is as though this culture springs out like an alien life-form complete with its own entirely separate dynamics of existence, like fungi on a tree. Dancehall seems to be the very antithesis of the hegemonic conservative cultural and ethical situation in Jamaica, and as such, appears to have no cultural and historical context whatsoever. In contrast to the neat suburbs of Mona, Hope Pastures and Red Hills, whose tidy lawns and calm roads mimic the middle class suburbia enclaves of middle America or middle England, the dancehall scene springs forth with mutant abundance, in a flash of garish wigs, guttural screech-speech, lamé and sequins stretched all too revealingly across exuberant expanses of black flesh.



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This dislocated appearance is however just that - an appearance. Any more than a cursory examination of the dancehall complex reveals deep cultural historical connections at work in its constitution, demonstrating an attuned dialogue with a hybrid array of cultural elements. This amalgam of cultural forces is nowhere more evident than in terms of adornment. Synthetic fibre sits comfortably with natural fibre; a fine delicate Indian bridal nose ring in the shape of a gun is mixed with large gold ear-rings as patches of stretched materials, spandex, 'batty riders' frame the body. It is in the surface of adornment that the creative subjectivity and agency of women at the core of the phenomenon can be understood. The fabric and cut of dancehall fashion bear direct relations to the Jamaican masquerade tradition of Jonkonnu and 'Pitchy Patchy'. Here, women are clothed in strips of material gathered together to give the appearance of a jumble of loose layers of fabric. From here, we can begin to understand a key point about dancehall culture: that it is far more closely connected to the deep tissues of the Jamaican folk tradition than has been considered.

Old characters like Pitchy Patchy have their counterparts in contemporary dancehall. The best jeans (stone washed or plain) are made to look ragged with designer-looking patches of varying colours, with strategic rips or strips hanging like the organised raggedness of traditional Pitchy Patchy. (Nettleford 1995:16D)

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Female adornment is thus grounded in a dense hybrid matrix of borrowings and repetitions, creating a truly diasporic culture of exuberant excess that is at once deeply embedded within a Jamaican folkloric tradition and at the same time a differential reprise within the longer span of diasporic continuity. It is in terms of this hybrid contextualisation of female adornment that we can begin to understand the subversive agency of resistance at work in dancehall. In the context of the conservative and moralistic society mentioned above, dancehall adornment invokes a visual subversion by returning to the subterranean sources of a certain strand of Jamaican folk culture. This subversive resistance cannot be understood as conforming to a Cartesian politics of conscious resistance. Instead, it is better viewed as an unconscious narcissistic resistance engendered by the will to survive and satisfy the soul under the daily threat of annihilation.

Finally, this examination of the issue of adornment in dancehall begins to unravel a specific but ingrained contingent relationship between the question of "survival" and that of the imagination, expression and identity. Here, we find marginalised elements of a marginalised society, impoverished, vulnerable, violated, in the midst of an urban and spiritual decay inflicted ultimately by the abstract authority of western capital and European class ideology, engaging in the most staggering excess. At this point, we are faced with a puzzling question: how can this basic subversion of the need/imagination opposition occur in such extreme circumstances? The expectation is quite the opposite: that it is only in the case of material comfort that questions of need and survival can be



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forgotten or displaced. In this case, how can the dancehall complex erect itself in such a decayed ecology?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to turn the expectation that excess follows material abundance (and its inverse, that attenuation follows material depletion) on its head. It is clear that instead of emaciated abjection, women participating within the dancehall complex respond to their socio-political context with excessive modes of expression. It is thus that the 'survival' at work in dancehall conforms to what can be called the logic of the mask: instead of a fixed order of *necessity* - of the basic physical issues of need and demand - necessity is undercut by the subversions of desire and expression:

Among the "people from below" the device of "masking" (in fancy-dress) persists with a vengeance. We still have reason to devise masks to disguise, to create music to affirm to assemble dances to celebrate [...]. The actual dress is important. For the costume is a mask helping to transform the persona to do wild and uninhibited things - much tulle, dark glasses replacing the old meshwire masks the Jonkonnu characters wore and still do, sequins and costume jewellery, beads, baubles of all kinds, earrings (knobs or droplets), all reminiscent of the pieces of broken mirror on the fancy dress of traditional Jonkonnu! (Nettleford 1995:16D)

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As with the Sapeurs, survival becomes the survival of an imagination that refuses to be flattened by the forces of diminishment at work beyond the frontiers of the ghetto. Unconsciously drawing on historical resources, survival in dancehall culture steps outside of the issue of authenticity and steps *inside* the mask. In this way, a truly radical transgression is seen to be in operation: dancehall bears no conformity with even the basic existential/social hierarchies of the normative frame. Dancehall women live in such extreme circumstances - of crossfire, acid attacks, rape, abuse, and negation that fearlessness itself becomes the only mode of survival. It is through the hardship of extreme circumstances that fearlessness arises: the toughness of a life that has been pushed to the limit and is no longer afraid of death or pain. Having nothing to fear opens up the space for senseless act of violence on the one hand and on the other, transgression and the permissive logic of the carnival is transcended. It is precisely in this liminal situation that women finally can lose any anxiety over the social perception of their appearance. Instead of the fear of being deemed a 'skettel' or a tart or seen as obscene, the dancehall woman dresses for herself and her community, without care for uptown mores and respectability. The dancehall woman finally enters a state of narcissistic non-being.

We see once again that the black body, signifier of abjection and oppression, is, through cultural scenes such as that of dancehall, the very means by which redemption may be achieved. The women of Jamaican dancehall practice their art in the most hostile of circumstances, with each day a literal fight for survival. It is in this ecology of violence that such strong and excessive forms of adornment arise, born out of fearlessness. Excess



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becomes an affirmation of being and community, fostered through an exhibitionist and monstrous display. However, just as the forms of adornment at work in dancehall involve careful (if unconscious) co-ordinations of different cultural frames - Indian, folk and western, so too do the movements and rhythms of the dance of dancehall also follow patterns of gathering. The excess of adornment goes hand in hand with a discipline of the body in movement that works through re-memoration.

### **Dance and Eros in Dancehall**

Beyond being a space of hedonist escapism for the impoverished lower classes of Jamaican society, what must be understood is that dancehall culture fits within a wider cultural frame where dance and its accompanying modes of adornment have always occupied a central place in the cultural and psychic survival of black people. As the anthropologist Ted Polhemus has written, dance is 'the embodiment of [a] particular people's unique way of life - their culture in the broadest sense'. Dance, he continues, 'is the metaphysics of culture' (1993: 8). For the black diaspora, dance is a means of cultural survival telling the story of struggle in the New World and the continuation of African musicality and rhythm (Nettleford 1985). At a period when the enslaved communities were denied public use of their African languages, they communicated their pain, sorrow and jubilation through dance. According to Nettleford, dance in its New World configuration offers 'one of the most effective means of communication, revealing many profound truths about complex social forces operative in a society groping toward both material and spiritual betterment' (ibid: 19). For enslaved peoples, dance was a way of

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momentarily transcending everyday life and constructing an alternative reality. In opposition to laws that legislated against ownership of the body of the enslaved, the body in rhythmic movement was an important source of autonomy. By training and disciplining the body through dance, enslaved Africans retained control over their body and its disalienation through historical continuity. The relief brought about through dancing is therefore not merely egocentric and to be understood through an individualistic analysis. In dancing, the community itself in the present and across time gets gathered and re-membered against all forces of disintegration. As Sondra Horton Fraleigh notes in her work on the phenomenology of dance, dance is inter-subjective, an example of 'being with the other'. 'Dance', she writes, 'closes the distance between self and other. As the dancer dances for others, she instantiates others in her dance and dances the body-of-everyone' (1987: 61). Dancehall is therefore in the broadest sense a form of historical and social remembrance - a "genetic" repetition of pain that avoids the path of disintegration and dis-memberment by gathering the past and the reality of existential dread joyfully: re-membering, putting it together in the context of the dance with love and urgency. The body is, thus, one of the primary tools with which the powerless can empower themselves:

The body is the first form of power with which all persons can identify.

Ontogenetically they discover and master their bodies in time, space and effort patterns. Through sight and movement they enter relationships.

The lived-in body symbolically sustains people's power as they groom and adorn themselves, exercise, watch what they eat, and otherwise try to



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control their bodies [...]. Yet the imagination is free, and dance, an activity that depends on flaunting the body, focuses awareness on the body and its associations. (Hanna 1988: 13)

While the music deck at a dancehall social space is usually coded in the language of maleness, in contrast, the dancefloor is the arena where women exercise control over their body, stimulate sexual desire and call themselves into being. On the dancefloor, *women allow themselves to feel, to emote, and to enjoy the freedom of their body, as they love themselves into a feeling state*. Enveloped in the sound, they allow the dancing to return them to the eroticism of their body. Whether it is a solo *winin'* or 'bubbling' with a male or female, the dance becomes a speaking through the body, a way of conveying to the partner its bodily desires and needs that need not move beyond the dancefloor. In this space the restriction on women's display of physical intimacy is recontextualised as women *win'* together, dissolving the gendered role of the passive/female/follower and the active/male/lead as women recall the reason of the body, the reason for dancing.

In general terms, dancing can reconnect us to our erotic potential; it can stimulate sexual fantasies that move beyond the dance floor and the dancing partner to exist in something like Scarry's realm of the imagination.<sup>4</sup> In her influential essay 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', Audre Lorde writes that, the (white) male sexual economy has suppressed the erotic 'as a source of power and information' within our lives (1984: 53).

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<sup>4</sup> In many ways, the practices of adornment and movement amongst women in dancehall can be seen as just the sort of redemptive *work* that was highlighted in the discussion of Scarry's phenomenology of pain above.

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Against such negating forces, it is therefore imperative that women reclaim the erotic as a form of power. For Lorde, the erotic must not be conflated with pornography 'which emphasizes sensation without feeling' (ibid: 54). Erotic - the sensual - is an expression of sexual arousal and desire, as well as a life-giving force that can energise and nurture us in our life, in our work toward changes and in our ways of being in the world. It is an expression of 'what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings' (ibid: 56). As Lorde writes,

The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word, *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects [...]. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (1984: 55)

The erotic, according to Lorde, can be healing and empowering. It is not confined to our beds; it is that and more. Or, as James Baldwin puts it, 'the "sensual" is not intended to bring to mind quivering dusky maidens or priapic blacks studs...[rather it is the capacity] to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread' (1962: 350). The erotic, especially as it is expressed in dance and dancing, is not simply a mating game between the sexes, it is the ideal of any community. The culture of dancehall *is* about sex and sexuality, of course, but to reduce it to sex is to fail in absolute terms to understand the



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complex functions the culture plays within society. Once again, to view dancehall as organised solely around sex is to repeat the Eurocentric (and nihilistic) view that black cultural expression is often simply sexual expression. In rejection of this, we can say that the erotic is a mood, a state of being that can express a variety of emotions: joy, elation, amusement and intense sadness, and therefore, it is 'the desire to move in fulfilment of communal value that motivates dance' (Fraleigh 1987: 58). As Eileen O'Neill notes, the erotic can reveal 'the gaps and void [...] within our sexual discourse' (1989: 70). Once we recognise the power of the erotic in our lives according to Lorde, 'we begin to give up [...] being satisfied with suffering and self-negation. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within' (1984: 58).

The multiple dimensions of the erotic have led O'Neill to speak of the "eroticisation of pain". This is the capacity to 'express sadness and simultaneously to eroticize it' (1989: 70). The notion of the eroticisation of pain helps to clarify how through dance, women in dancehall culture fuse the reality of pain, oppression and everyday pressures that threatens to engulf them into a joyous celebration of the body and the erotics of the community past and present. Rather than pain being responded to with destruction through nihilistic expressions (which sometimes happen), it is embraced and channelled *pre-reflectively* into dancing and imaginative modes of embodiment. The dancing woman does not forget or suppress the pain of her existential situation, but rather she attempts to inflect it with joy and move towards bodily integrity and somatic remembering. The eroticisation of pain in dance then involves *integration*, a return 'for the hundredth time, [to] that same pain and that same pleasure' (R. Ellison 1961: 23).

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A question that might be developing in the reader's mind is this: 'Surely the activities in dancehall culture is less about pain and more about pleasure and the escapist affirmation of pleasure?' My response is that *no* black diasporic cultural practice or activity (as yet) can be discussed outside the history of slavery and the ongoing oppression that animates and re-modifies it.<sup>5</sup> As such, one of the key pre-conditions for the manifestation of dancehall in its current form has to be the urgency to conquer the social/moral/economic destitution that wrecks havoc on daily life. Such a perspective avoids the luxury of reading dancehall as solely the pursuit and affirmation of hedonism or a pleasurable form of letting-it-all-hang-out. Of course, hedonism plays a central role in dancehall culture; the point is to show that there is something else at work in the culture - a history of folkloric practices and a dynamic of desire. Further still, any form of creativity to my mind seems to require a background of some sort of pain, injustice or existential anguish in order to flourish. As James Baldwin wrote long ago, '[...] people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are' (1962: 376). Or, as the Yorubas in Western Nigeria would say, "when the belly is full", creativity is often stifled or eroded, or loses its edge. In its stead, decadence, smugness and cultural exhaustion take over and is passed off as creativity. The reverse of this might be that when the "belly is too empty", what can be imagined is contracted and reduced to the politics of the belly and consequently the poetics of the belly is deferred. It is perhaps thus that we can begin to

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<sup>5</sup>For exploration of the relationship between historical violence, pain and creativity see Barbara Browning's excellent account on the Brazilian Samba, where she suggested that the community that produces and maintains such an exuberant dance technique is a community that is always hungry with lives scattered over hills called *favelas*. *Samba: resistance in motion* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis 1995) xxi/xxiii; For a similar account on Rumba see Yvonne Daniel *Rumba: Dance and social Change in contemporary Cuba* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis 1995)



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appreciate the diversity, richness *and* deficit of black diasporic expressive cultures in the context of the suffused torture of white supremacy.

Therefore, as in Scarry's formulation, the reality of pain is pre-reflectively externalised through the *work* of the dancing body in the public sphere. The work of performance in dancehall is the equivalent of Scarry's imagination latching onto an object in the external world. To say that the performance of the body in dancehall culture is the affirmation of pure pleasure is not only reductive but to fall yet again into one of the key aporias of western thought: the denial of the body as the fundamental principle of existence, printing and imprinting historical and social meaning upon itself and out into the world. This blindspot can never acknowledge that by fusing the reality of pain with Eros, 'the "lived-body" can revitalise itself in order to face long bouts of struggle by being put in touch with its own undeniable sources of pleasure within itself' (O'Neill 1989: 70).

Like Lorde's account of the erotic's potential to disclose profound truths about our life, Judith Lynne Hanna has suggested that dancing can also 'permit futuristic explorations and otherwise dangerous uncloseting' (1988: 6). Could dancehall women be using the dance to speak to each other, telling stories of lust, desire and pleasure that lies buried between their inner thighs? Or, is it a way to act out on the dancefloor the story of forbidden love? Are they calling attention to each other's repressed desires? Is it a playful affirmation of female bonding and rivalry?

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In Isaac Julien's film *The Darker Side of Black*, Inge Blackman points out that in Britain dancehall culture is one of the few social spaces 'black women can be sexual and dance with each other in a lustful way not really allowed in any other black culture.... and black lesbians participate in this culture.' This show of physical intimacy exists in the context of a musical genre that calls for the repression if not the death of homosexuals. We might ask: why are these women permitted to be sensual with each other? Are women permitted to dance in a lustful way because the possibility of lesbian desire is often sexually arousing to the heterosexual male? Or is it because men have no choice in the matter? What investment does it have for the heterosexual male spectator? What is the relationship between the body on show in this culture and the expression of female sexuality?

Despite being associated with the body and carnality, women are denied the right to autonomous (sexual) pleasure and desire. In different ways feminists have sought to 'deconstruct the phallic organisation of sexuality and its code which positions women's sexuality and signified body as a mirror or complement to male sexuality' (Dallery 1989: 54). As such, in her influential early text *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray recasts and re-theorises female sexuality, pleasure and eroticism by constructing a female libidinal economy that is distinct from the male phallic Order. Like Lorde, Irigaray argues that female eroticism has been repressed and denied by patriarchal culture and thus posits a female sexuality that is antithetical to the scopophilic, static disembodied phallic male sexuality. The female sexual pleasure, Irigaray proposes, is located in the body, and it is plural and autoerotic. This female sexuality is



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not centred around the penis, but rather, 'women have sex organs just about everywhere' (1985:103). Speaking metaphorically, Irigaray affirms that, woman,

experiences, pleasure almost everywhere, even without speaking of the hysterization of her entire body, one can say that the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle than is imagined. (ibid: 101)

In her work, Irigaray argues that male and female desires are distinct and when brought together, male desire can only repress the female. Citing Michel Foucault, Margaret Whitford points out that, 'the discourse of sex is the locus of the (male) subject's subjection' (1991: 150). Hence, in positing a polysexual female desire, Irigaray attempts to dislodge male phallic desire and liberate women from the repression and silences that have characterised female desire. She attempts to construct a female sexuality that is outside the male exchange economy and this opens up space for a lesbian sexuality. Irigaray's polysexuality enables us to become more aware of our bodies and erotic possibilities, to use our bodies to articulate our pleasure and desire.

This might seem very limiting or contrary to dancehall women whose sexuality might not necessarily be conceived outside of the male exchange economy. It is certainly the case that women in dancehall often engage in competition with each other, forming modelling posses 'in support of a group member who is upset because her matie (Matie is a woman who is trying to steal another woman's partner, or the other woman in the man's life) is at

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the dance' (Walker 1994: 34). These conflicts are often a reflection of a tension that occurs elsewhere in the community. Thus, far from being a safe place, the dancehall can often become a site where conflict is played out and negotiated. However, the Irigarayan focus on female eroticism and autoeroticism is echoed in the dances and physical attitudes of the women in dancehall culture, where women as active agents in relations with others, generate their own eroticism which is both inner generated as it is outer directed.

I am not in any way suggesting that these women are closet lesbians (they could very well be!); rather, I am trying to suggest that in the moment of dancing, reality becomes suspended as the dancers allow the sound, the feel of flesh rubbing together to move them to another realm of erotic love or lust. I am suggesting that in the process of dancing the destructive narrative about the body is deconstructed, unbalanced, and uncreated, only for it to be reconstructed, rebalanced, recreated (Schechner 1993). In the flow of dancing the status quo can be challenged as women momentarily assume a different persona that acts as a release from the pressures of what Michel de Certeau (1984) has called 'the practice of everyday life'. Dancehall is therefore as much about the power of place and practice in the constitution of transgressive liberatory actions as it is about a motile body in dialogue with itself, the community that grounds, and the outside. Women in dancehall use a variety of different dance repertoires to articulate their personal experience, the history of the black female body in Jamaican society, as they search for a new way of being. I am suggesting that the narrative of heterosexual reality of some of these women's lives dissolves as inchoate feelings and thoughts mesh together as the women move each other



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into an orgasmic state of aliveness in temporary zones of the imagination. As Hanna asserts:

Rather than being a precursor to sexual intimacy, dance may be physical and psychological sexual sublimation. Orgasmic gratification may come from actual or empathic dance involvement. Dance often has the excitement, release, and exhaustion characteristic of sexual climax' (1988: 47)

Dance not only releases and reconnects these women to their erotic possibilities; it also re-establishes the female body's capacity to be both gentle and powerful. No more is the passive, muted female of earlier times when Rastafarian ideology had a powerful influence on Jamaican popular music; dancehall women stubbornly assert their own powerful embodied agency. This show of public agency is reflected in their extravagant celebration of the carnivalesque excess and dance movements that manage to combine slow sensuous movement of the hip with strong energetic, and often athletic movements that are normally associated with male dancing, without denying their feminine embodiment. Instead, they show that the female is both gentle and strong all at once. In one dance known as "head-top dancing", we see women in half-headstand with knees slightly bent, buttocks thrust upwards gyrating dreams of a new relationship with defiled buttocks. As the beat intensifies, various parts of the body move independently to the complex rhythms, playing, teasing and displaying the strength and power of their bodies - the dance of derision mentioned in chapter three. The image of protruding black buttocks

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that renders black females in western pornographic imagination as hypersexual and inferior (Bush 1990, Gilman 1980) is, re-emphasised and over-emphasised, valorised and displayed as a sign of beauty to be marvelled at. Here, as in Spike Lee's film *School Daze*, the buttocks, are 'displayed as playful cultural nationalist resistance, they challenge assumptions that the black body, its skin color and shape, is a mark of shame' (hooks 1992:63). Defiantly, the buttocks are thrust in your face as they move independently from the rest of the body up and down, shaking excessively, challenging one to look and admire, even be aroused by the sheer energy and power that is often obscured because the show of power and strength is almost always equated with men.

In the socio-cultural space of dancehall, dancing becomes a kind of exercise that permits the dancers to become more aware of the limits and possibilities of their bodies and the way their bodies are distorted and deformed by their socio-historical experiences. As much as the dance deconstructs and reconstructs the body, dancing also reconnects the body (if only sub-consciously) to its past and present as it struggles to deal with the pains and pleasures of life. This dialectic is sometimes reflected in the facial expressions of the women as they dance. On the one hand, the facial expressions can sometimes appear strained, serious, distant and grimacing; on the other, as the body is enveloped in the sound, the painful and detached look becomes more blissful and serene as the women give themselves over to the music, letting their bodies become the vehicle to imagine and communicate inexpressible rage. But this rage is softened by the possibilities of joy in dancing in a somatic exemplification of Baldwin's plea for a transformed historical understanding, and the beauty that may arise from it.



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In this chapter I have sought to place the formal aspects of retention - the traces of apart playing, polyrhythm, antiphony etc. - within the existential setting of an enduring oppression. At the largest scale, black people within the diaspora continue to be oppressed by white supremacy in its myriad forms. Closer in, black communities are often vulnerable to internalising white supremacy - as shadism intertwines with class and gender distinctions to reproduce historic oppressions on the inside. It is this context of ongoing affliction and existential pain that is the backcloth to black creative expression and the energetic deployment of African aesthetic forms. It has been the ability of black expressive communities to take up these forms and make them relevant to each new context, in the midst of addiction, abuse and impoverished spirits. Cultural phenomena such as Jamaican dancehall demonstrate such ambiguities in stark detail; in the midst of gross materialism and a society sharply at odds with itself in class terms, a form of life has emerged that allows women to celebrate their own embodied agency in the midst of destructive chaos.

## Chapter 5: Fanon Can't Dance: Antiphonies of the Gaze

In this chapter I will challenge the negative discourses of the "gaze"<sup>1</sup> informing both inter-racial encounters and filmic discourse by offering an account based around what I am calling the *antiphony of the gaze*. I will suggest that, as in the example of the rhythmic-gestural patternings of music and dance, black diasporic vision often involves a structure of call-and-response which simply does not fit within conventional accounts of the relations between vision and power. In her book *Double Exposure: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, Mieke Bal argues that while it is important to pay attention to vision's relation to power, it is vital that we differentiate various modes of vision (1996: 256). Writing about black female spectatorship in 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators', bell hooks makes a similar point when she writes that, 'Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency' (1992: 116). Using the film *Dancehall Queen* (1998) to challenge conventional discourses of the gaze,

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<sup>1</sup> The negativity accorded to the "gaze" within feminist film theory and artistic practice implies a logic of (primarily white male) domination and sadism or in terms of a logic of irreversibility between the activity of the subject and the passivity of the object. Such a perspective was introduced into contemporary visual theory through Laura Mulvey's 1975 seminal article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Mulvey's claim that filmic techniques, spectatorial identification and visual pleasure are structured around a "masculine" mode of looking greatly influenced a generation of film theorists, in particular feminist visual theorists. However, this has not been without criticism and refinement. There is an extensive literature on this: Mulvey (1981), E. Ann Kaplan (1983), Mary A Doane (1982). To move beyond Mulvey's early negative account of vision, some (feminist) visual theorists have tried to offer another way of conceptualising vision. This has involved making a separation distinction between the "gaze" and the "Look" or the "gaze" and the "glance". The "gaze" is possessive, subjective and is linked to power-knowledge and corresponds to Foucault's panopticon. The "look" on the other hand implies a structure of mutuality, inter-relationship and processuality between subject and object. It is not a negating activity but one of mutual recognition and affirmation (Kaplan 1997, Bryson 1983).



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I will argue that the dialectics of looking relations cannot be sustained. This is because looking relations have to be understood within a framework of the existence of two modes of looking which unfold and slide into each other. The first mode of vision can be characterised as the irreversibly possessive or objectifying look (the Sartrean 'gaze'). Sartre maintains the view that interpersonal relations are structured by a logic of alienation and domination. The gaze can only be resisted by a counter gaze, leading to a dialectical struggle. On the other hand, the second mode of looking is less about opposition and more about resistance, refusal and play. I will call this form of relational resistance the "female rebuff".<sup>2</sup> I will suggest that in *Dancehall Queen* the gaze is subverted, undermined by the female rebuff, a dynamic interplay between looking and being looked at. The contention is that when looking and being looked at are no longer seen as polar opposites, there is a play or reciprocity that makes the two terms *relational* rather than oppositional.

On the basis of this relationality, I will challenge the conventions of looking beyond *Dancehall Queen* and propose that *all* looking relations must be reconstituted in terms of what I am calling an *antiphonal continuum*. That is, my reading of *Dancehall Queen* will lead to a reciprocal model of vision which challenges the paradigms set in place by Western philosophers from Descartes through to Sartre<sup>3</sup>. I am aware that this is a strong

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<sup>2</sup> My characterisation of the female rebuff has similarities with that of the "look" mentioned in the first footnote of this chapter. The difference between the two accounts resides in how they relate to the "gaze". In my theorisation, the female rebuff lies along an antiphonal continuum with the gaze, while in accounts of the look, the gaze and the look are clearly separated from each other.

<sup>3</sup> For an archeology of the role of vision in Western philosophical discourse see Evelyn Fox Keller and

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claim to make, but in response, I would argue that the violence done to our relational being-in-the-world by a dialectical optics of domination and submission is even stronger. The strength of my claim is merely commensurate with the apparent incontestability of that which it is contesting. My purpose here is to uncover the dynamics of a relational looking which has been obscured by much of the contemporary film theory's over-investment in psychoanalysis. Such a project has already been undertaken by film theorists working within the phenomenological tradition (e.g. Sobchack (1992). In his book *It Looks at You: The Returned Gaze of Cinema*, Winston Dixon Wheeler argues that the act of viewing a film or video, the film views as much as we view it, 'until the film itself *becomes* a gaze, rather than an object to be gazed upon' (1995: 2). Furthermore, he writes, 'cinema audience members may, at times, verbally or gesturally respond to the spectacle they bear witness to on the screen, but for the most part, audience reception of the cinematic process involves a reciprocity of "looks": the gaze of the spectator and the concomitant gaze of the screen looking into darkness' (ibid: 2).

I suggest that the way one can begin this study is by examining the question of *agency* in relation to vision. Such a consideration permits an account of the looking relation that privileges the complexities of the agent's work in relation to external economies of vision rather than the passivity of the subject. In this way, one is forced to enquire about the relation between the looker and the looked and vice-versa, as well as the material and

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Christine R Grontkowski (1983). They argue that there is a need to make a separation between the "objectifying" function of vision and its communicative or erotic function. Through such separation, we can begin to flesh out more appropriately the ways in which gender bias has infiltrated or corrupted our visual relations.



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historical context in which the looking takes place, and the meaning and nature of looking (in their different spatio-temporal contexts). Significantly, the ways in which the above pre-supposes the lived-body situation in perception and expression will be explored. In order to set the stage for my reading of *Dancehall Queen*, I will begin by looking at Frantz Fanon's implicit response to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of vision in his essay 'The Lived Experience of the Black' (1967). I will argue that where Merleau-Ponty emphasises the reversibilities of somatic freedom (otherwise known as the 'corporeal schema'), Fanon forces us to consider the question of bodily unfreedom and irreversibilities. I will argue, however, that Fanon's consideration of bodily unfreedom tends to lead him back into a Sartrean cul-de-sac in which there can be no redemptive space for the gaze outside of either captivation or combat. Fanon's stance accords with Mieke Bal's assertion that the dominant model of vision 'tends to reduce looking to power only, to an absolute subject-object relation, wherein the viewer/receiver has total power and the object of the look does not even participate in communication' (1996:262). Fanon's metaphysics ultimately acquiesces to this model, where sight is equated with insight.

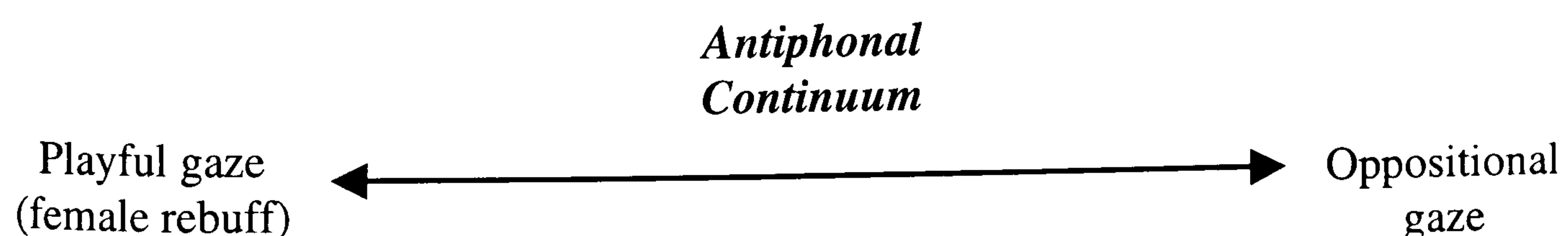
Since the seventeenth century when natural historians began to classify human differences, technologies of vision came to articulate racial, gender and class difference and hierarchy (Gilman 1980, Schiebinger 1993). In different ways, Winthrop D. Jordan (1977) and David Brion Davis (1966), have argued that the exploitative encounter between Africans and Europeans is served by contingent, but shifting perceptible visual differences. Africans were marked as corporeally different and Europeans remained

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corporeally unmarked. In this way, the connection between vision and racial subjectivity came to depend on an ocular knowledge that is capable of penetrating and revealing the “truth” of the subject. This ocular-logic is central to the reception, treatment and representation of Africans in the New World context. In his essay ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’ Stuart Hall has written on the relationship between vision, representation and domination. Hall writes,

The ways in which black people, black experience, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said’s “orientalist” sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as “Other” [...]. It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that “knowledge”, not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, but by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm. (1990: 225)

Rather than denying the validity of the above account and Fanon’s experience I will seek to reposition them in terms of the *antiphonal continuum* already mentioned:





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At the left extreme of the diagram lies the female rebuff. Here, the gaze allows itself visual play with the other. The actions of the agent are engendered on the basis of spontaneity and non-objectification and an absence of any absolutely determined power relations. At the other extreme lies a dialectical model of the gaze. The subject is forced to either acquiesce to the domineering insight of the eye of power or to resist through an oppositional gaze. Rather than choose between these extremes, I insert a bridge between inter-relational play and oppositionality. It is vital that these two extremes are placed on a continuum,<sup>4</sup> for neither position is fixed or static, rather they unfold onto each other. Such a perspective is offered in Bal's reading of Manet's *Olympia*. Bal reads against the grain of conventional reading of the painting. In general, the black woman in *Olympia* is viewed as a servant bringing flowers left by the white woman's client or lover. Bal posits that the black woman 'may not be serving but visiting. The flowers, echoing those on the bedspread, may be hers; hers to give' (1996:284). For Bal, the presence of the black woman suggests 'an alternative site from where to look, an alternative agent with whom to look. She becomes a focal point, a possible mirror image for an engaging viewing (ibid:284). In effect, in any visual representation there are multiple fields of vision through which one can read the image. Such a reading position is however partially circumscribed by the embodied situation of the reader and their place in the wider field of power.

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of the antiphonal continuum in rethinking the question of the look is a response to Stuart Hall's call for a reading which attempts to 'reconcile - or at least hold in a proper balance - [...] both Fanon's spectacular demonstration of the power of the racial binary to *fix*, and Bhabha's equally important and theoretically productive argument that all binary systems of power are nevertheless, *at the same time*, often if not always, troubled and subverted by ambivalence and disavowal' (1996:27).

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Moreover, there is always a possibility that in any reading of vision or visual representation these two modes of vision are present. This reading of the structure of visual domination and subjection entails therefore that the power of vision be seen as fundamentally *ambiguous*. Once vision is complicated in this way, the necessity ascribed to the gaze as inherently either possessive or dialectical is challenged.

In sum, the aim of this chapter is to show that: a) the looking relation takes place somewhere *between* play and struggle; b) therefore, a relational resistance (through the female rebuff) is possible; and c) this is demonstrated in the film *Dancehall*.

### **Vision, Knowledge and Power**

Here, I shall begin at the right hand side of the diagram above - an oppositional model of the gaze. Towards the end of chapter one I raised the question: can you be a diasporic subject and not know it? From the discussion of Merleau-Ponty and Fanon in the first chapter, it is clear that knowledge of and about the body cannot be framed wholly as a conscious representation to which one has direct access. This raises the question: how do we know about our bodies?

As I demonstrated in the first chapter, knowledge of the body is acquired through bodily conditionings. These conditionings situate the body within a cultural context which orchestrates its bodily competence. Knowledge is not first of all a mental event or



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cognition but the effect of a pre-existing set of cultural parameters into which the body is inserted and with which it is in dialogue. Knowledge is first of all *of the body*, or rather of the body in relational context. The body acquires knowledge of itself through mimetic engagement with its culture. Such mimetic acts unfold a perpetual reworking and renewal of pre-existing patternings. Out of this perpetual renewal, the body composes its own motile narrative which allows it to interact or dialogue with the world as an agent *in and of* history. In the first instance then, we do not *know* the body, rather, the body is what *allows* us to know (Burkitt 1999, Stoller 1995). The first form that knowledge takes is therefore the corporeal knowledge of motile patterning in communication with its society. Given this fact, I suggest that “representational” or “conscious” knowledge is grounded within a “body knowledge” that always precedes it. Knowledge is first of all *tacit*, not reflective. In other words, beneath all epistemological claims of the subject, there is always a “knowledge” grounded in the body. And because it is always inscribed within its terms, representational knowledge is *implicitly* knowledge of the body.

Now, how does this review of Merleau-Ponty impact upon the question: can you be a diasporic subject and not know it? Given that tacit knowledge is grounded in the body, it follows that this knowledge is an *effect* of the body; of a body coded and grounded within a specific cultural, historical and political systems or conditioning. Steeped in the layers of freedom of their cultural conditioning, the diasporic subject is not immediately aware of her origins. Just as we forget the rules of riding a bike once we have acquired competence, so we forget the labour of acquiring identity. Given the fact of distance alone, diasporicity remains *implicit*, according to the relation between tacit knowledge

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and bodily competence just spelled out. This latent sense of distance and difference from reflective awareness and transparency can be articulated in nomological terms or in terms of the looking relation. The diasporic agent has yet to be *named* as such; her freedom is a function of being without a distinguishing name. Moreover, her anonymity is more or less secure insofar as she has escaped the externalising gaze of the other. In this hypothetical moment prior to the gaze and to naming, the diasporic subject is free and unknowable. This freedom is assumed on the basis of *anonymity*. In its ideal form, anonymity allows the agent to take her existence for granted, as an unquestioned and unconscious affirmation of the right to exist in her body. As a free and anonymous being, the agent exists within the terms of a culture that is not challenged into naming itself. For instance, within the economy of race, black people are marked and highly visible, whereas white people are generally unmarked and invisible. Precisely because whiteness is unmarked, its power is concealed so that it becomes normative, expressing itself in unspoken and tacit gestural and perceptual practices (Alcoff 1999: 19). As Charles W. Mills writes, in his book *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, whiteness is so normative that many white people are not even aware of its power, the ways in which they benefit from it. Mills writes,

White experience is embedded as normative, and the embedding is so deep that its normativity is not even identified as such. For this would imply that there was some other way that things could be, whereas it is obvious that this is just the way things are. A relationship to the world that is founded on racial privilege becomes the relationship to the world.



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(1998:10)

It would appear therefore that there is a relationship between whiteness, normativity and anonymity. Normativity is the matrix in which anonymity is constituted. Having established that reflective awareness of diasporicity is avoided in hypothetical context of namelessness which Merleau-Ponty's thought explores, I now want to explore the genesis of awareness itself.

Following Fanon, I contend that awareness of diasporicity comes at the moment of being inserted into the white scopic regime, or named as Spillers suggests is the case for black women. It is the reflection from outside that challenges the ideal of anonymity just referred to. As Fanon suggests, outside of this racialised encounter the 'black man among his own [...] is satisfied with an intellectual understanding of these differences' (1967: 110). Growing up as part of a colonial elite in the French Caribbean island of Martinique, Fanon did not face the challenge to his identity, which a bodily encounter with the outside will impose. However, *through* an encounter with the white world, Fanon is named as other, as *different*, and as a site of horror. As such, his anonymity is denied, and with it, his freedom is challenged. And thenceforth, forms of bodily unfreedom undercut a spontaneous agency. Recognising the essential freedom of anonymity, Fanon 'strives for anonymity, for invisibility' to the point that he was willing to 'accept the lot, as long as no one notices' him (ibid: 116). Introduced into a white world, Fanon is forced therefore into a scopic over-determination where his understanding of the world is mediated through the body – his dark skin colour. That is, the imposition of the white visual

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regime contests the capacity for subjective expression of those who exist at a distance from its terms. Agents are over-determined because they can no longer exist as free and anonymous beings. Moreover, black people are forced to apprehend themselves through the eyes of an external white other. As Hall attests, the 'dominant regimes of representation had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as other' (1990:225 authors emphasis). For Fanon, a single sentence the seemingly innocuous "Look, a Negro!" - eliminates and forecloses the possibility of affirming the body's anonymous freedom. Moving within a white culture that conceals its own skin privilege through marking the black skin as highly visible, Fanon is forced to experience his world through scopic over-determination. Consequently, through a negotiation of this scopic over-determination, the diasporic agent is forced into an avowal of diasporicity, an acknowledgement, if not an acceptance of difference. Thus, for Fanon, the look of the other, epidermal reductionism, marks the beginning of alienation, of being marked as different and the loss of anonymity.

For Fanon, this act of scopic-overdetermination serves to reduce black difference to a generality. An anonymity that guarantees a degree of agency is undercut by a generality that refuses individuality. An individual black person becomes a representative of an anonymous black collective. As Fanon writes: 'It was always the Negro teacher, the Negro doctor (1967: 117). In this instance anonymity is sought within an economy of Naming, Looking and Stereotyping.

Put another way, it is the insertion of embodied black subjectivity within white regime of



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representation that leads to the awareness of diasporicity, of difference. Within the terms of Fanon's position, this insertion and encounter with the white world, can only be perceived as a negation, a violation of the subject's capacity to *be* and *affirm* the freedom of anonymity. It is through the violence of the gaze that what was previously an *hypothetical*, or in Fanon's words a merely "intellectual" understanding of one's difference, explicitly terrorises the order of knowledge. The black subject is no longer embraced by the security of residing safely within norms of vision; an anonymous individual expressing a culture which does not yet name itself as 'black'. Instead, in the racial encounter, there is a denial and questioning of the body's autonomy and freedom. The subject is faced with and forced towards a skewed conception of himself, envisaged and named for the first time as "black". He or she can no longer be at home in their body. The subject's being is experienced through the eyes of the other, and therefore, forced towards a perverse and alienated construction of self. It is important to note here that unlike Hegel and Sartre, Fanon's account closes off the possibility of challenging the gaze. Therefore, he allows the perspective of the other's gaze to shatter the cultural framework in which his corporeal schema previously derives meaning. Consequently, the black subject is decentred from its world, dis-located, made alien to herself. What are the effects of this dislocational naming, this power of vision to fix and alienate?

Again, it is within the pages of Fanon's book that the phenomenological effects of this dislocational and fixated naming can be seen in all their force and with all their violence. The dissonant structure of his essay 'The Lived Experience of the Black' is a testimony to the psychic torture Fanon's personal racial encounter unleashed. It should however be

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noted that Fanon's account is not merely the personal anguish of a schizophrenic and individualised experience, but bears testimony of the collective trauma experienced under the perverse regime of colonialism and white supremacy. Moreover, the account he offers is historically and culturally situated - that of racism as it is experienced under the colonial situation. According to Fanon, there is first of all a violation of the subject's motile imperatives. The black subject is forced to exist within the normative structure of white society. The black subject is a script woven out of the white imagination. Out of this scripting and sculpturing the black subject *then* assumes and forms a relationship with herself which erodes the capacity for an autonomous self-construction. In this way any claims to bodily freedom are challenged and denied by the "white man's eyes".

Fanon observes:

I move slowly in the world, accustomed now to seek no longer for upheaval. I progress by crawling. And already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. Having adjusted their microtomies, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. (1967: 116)

The named and fixed subject faces the condition of 'absolute depersonalisation'. Fanon writes: 'In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity' (ibid: 110). Against Merleau-Ponty's assumption that the non-pathological body is always free, Fanon holds that in the case of the black subject, at least, the corporeal schema is interrupted by being seen: "Look, a Negro!". According to Lewis Gordon, being seen 'is an ironic way



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of *not being seen* through *being seen*. It is to be seen with overdetermined anonymity, which amounts, in effect, to invisibility' (1995: 58 authors emphasis). In this instance, invisibility expresses bodily unfreedom. The body, whose knowledge is first of all an adoption of a way of being-in-the-world, is denied this primary form of agency. It is at this moment, according to Gordon, that 'the Negro finds himself facing the objective alienation of his embodiment *out there*' (ibid: 59).

Seen and named as 'black', the subject encounters the difference of her diasporicity as absolute alienation. Being diasporic, therefore, entails that one's identity is named from the outside as being 'different', 'foreign', 'not from here'; being constantly asked the question 'where are you from?'; being looked at and having to attune one's listening to every diminutive catchphrase. Fanon puts it thus:

I slip into corners, and my long antennae pick up the catch-phrases strewn over the surface of things - nigger underwear smells of nigger-nigger teeth are white - nigger feet are big-the nigger's barrel chest - I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. (Fanon 1962: 116)

The subject is disempowered precisely because it would appear that there is no way of reclaiming these names as possibilities for a transformed agency.<sup>5</sup> From the position of

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<sup>5</sup> Writing about white presence in his essay 'Cultural Identity and Diasporic Representation', Stuart Hall

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being named as 'other', the Fanonian subject loses the capacity to re-name herself *as* a possibility for agency. Her capacity to participate within culture is curtailed. Once looked at as other, Fanon finds that there is no way to reclaim his body within the terms of an autonomous expression.<sup>6</sup> He is fixed by the other 'in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye' (1967: 109). The economy of the gaze fixes and objectifies on the basis of an *absolute* non-reciprocity. The potential for inter-communal relations is negated. Human communication between black and white people is an impossibility, an ideal Fanon yearns for. A gesture towards realising that inter-corporeal relation is met with violence: 'I shouted a greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged' (Fanon *ibid*: 115). For Fanon, the power of vision fixes his black being as inalienably outside hospitality, beyond the walls of the community of recognition.

Fanon's narrative expresses the absolute *negativity* of the racial encounter. Beyond Du Bois "double consciousness", the experience of oneself as subject and as other, diasporicity, as a form of explicit knowledge, is granted at the cost of the imposition of a denial of the expressive body. The subject is aware of herself only in the form of

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contests the absolute power of white representational regime to fix black subjectivity in the terms posited by Fanon. Hall writes, 'The error is not to conceptualize this 'presence' in terms of power, but to locate that power as wholly external to us - as extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skins'.

<sup>6</sup> Contrary to Fanon, bell hooks argues that in spite of the punishment meted out to black people under slavery, and adults rebuke not to look, she, like those in the enslaved communities was able to look in ways which allowed them to re-assert a subjectivity. She writes: "I knew as a child that the dominating power adults exercised over me and over my gaze was never so absolute that I did not dare to look, to sneak a peep, to stare dangerously, I knew that the slaves had looked. That all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an



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otherness. In Fanon's own case, the normative structure of the white gaze effected almost an absolute alienation. In a similar vein to Sartre, Fanon reads the looking relation in terms of the loss of human freedom (Jay 1993: 289). The exterior normative structure violated his ability to *be* at home in his fleshy existence: 'I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly' (Fanon 1962:114). In Merleau-Ponty's terms, the fixing of the gaze means that the looked-at subject can no longer take up the terms of their world and be the locus of agency. The subject becomes incapable of historical action. Instead of historical action, the diasporic subject is *ascribed* a history which is constructed solely in terms of the normative structure of the white world. In other words, black historicity unfolds or emerges from the terms constructed by the white normative scopic regime. As encountered in the first chapter, black history is reduced to a caricature organised around cannibalism. In the process of objectification, the black subject internalises this externally imposed sense of history through what Fanon calls 'the epidermalization-of this inferiority' (ibid:13).

Within the terms of Fanon's theory, the internalisation of an externally constructed history denies and eliminates the possibility of an assertive, self-generated black history. As such, the capacity to be an agent of another, more autonomous historical action is denied. Within this mis-recognition of black historical agency, black historical narratives are marginalised from the capitalised History of the World. Against the possibility of historical agency ascribed to all non-pathological bodies in Merleau-Ponty's terms, Fanon

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oppositional gaze' (1992:116)

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suggests that the corrosive power of the gaze under the colonial regime impedes black historical agency. Therefore, the freedom to transform history, implicit in Merleau-Ponty's corporeal schema, is denied to those bodies *positioned* and *composed* as different and as other.

In the terms of Fanon's phenomenological and existential analysis, the awareness of being diasporic is equivalent to the experience of powerlessness. Diasporicity is experienced as a form of absolute passivity. The subject acquiesces to the objectifying gaze of the external other without recourse to its own motile capacity. On these terms, diasporicity is tantamount to an aphasic social pathology. The diasporic subject cannot speak, *because* of their diasporicity. Knowledge of diasporicity in this light appears to be essentially tragic – an awareness of the unchallengeable conditions which ground unfreedom.

But surely this is not and cannot be the only possibility for self-representation and self-acknowledgment of diasporicity? Does Fanon mark out the structure of possibility for a reflexive and *active* diasporicity, or is there some factor at work in his text which precludes another form of expression? Is diasporicity the outcome of a gaze which is absolutely unreciprocable? Moreover, would any challenge to the fixing gaze itself involve a power struggle?

In order to pull back from Fanonian type schizophrenia, it is necessary to challenge the absolute power accorded to the fixing normative economy of the white gaze as it operates in his text. I shall do this by turning to the reversible model of vision in the work of Merleau-Ponty. I shall show that the birth of Fanon's awareness of his diasporicity



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through the pain of racial fixity marks the extreme point of an antiphonal continuum which does not by necessity lead to such absolute powerlessness.

Fanon's account assumes that the gaze which fixes the diasporic subject as inalienably outside the community of the Same is non-reciprocal. For Fanon, there does not seem to be any way in which the violence of the look can be returned, refused, played with or even destroyed. The absolute non-reciprocity of the look structures the black/white encounter. For Fanon 'there are two camps: the white and the black' (Fanon 1962: 10) and both forms of conditioning are always contestive, embattled and basically oppositionally structured. As such, there can be no moment of reciprocity or redemptive account of the look which does not involve a fundamental struggle for power. However, Merleau-Ponty's *oeuvre* not only allows for a look that is reciprocal, he makes it *a condition* of looking that there is reciprocation. He calls this condition of vision "reversibility".

This alternative model of vision co-ordinates nicely with some of the more recent research on Fanon. For instance, utilising the work developed by Maurice Natanson, Lewis Gordon suggests that there is an alternative account of historical agency which exists at a distance from the binarism of white/black history. This alternative phenomenological history is rooted in the practice of the everyday and an act of choice. Gordon writes: "Every black person *faces* history - *his* or *her* story - every day as a situation, as a choice, of how to stand in relation to oppression, of whether to live as a being subsumed by oppression or to live as active resistance towards liberation, or to live

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as mere indifference”(1995: 29). And as I will show later, the black dancing body in the film *Dance Queen*, suggests that women in the Jamaican ghetto choose to be active agents of history rather than be subsumed by the violence and injustice of their everyday lives.

### Reversibility and Agency in Looking

In *The Visible and The Invisible* (1968), Merleau-Ponty suggests that reversibility is the "ultimate truth" because it allows us to think about human subjectivity as fundamentally interpersonal. This is because the lived body structuring all human relations is at the core of Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Our identity as embodied beings is always grounded in reciprocal relations with other embodied beings. In the essay 'The Child's Relation with the Other', Merleau-Ponty writes, 'I live in the facial expressions of the other, as I feel him living in mine' (1964: 146). In grounding intersubjectivity on an intercorporeal relation, Merleau-Ponty suggests that reversible relations of perception cannot be based on the individualistic, autonomous, unitary subject of dualist ontology - rather a community of other perceivers is always implicated in our subjective experience. Unlike Sartre's account, where the other is defined dialectically, for Merleau-Ponty, the other's embodied consciousness is a *constitutive* component of my capacity to perceive.

According to Merleau-Ponty, being visible is a condition of visibility. To see is to exist within a visual field in which we share visibility with others. As he writes "Through other eyes we are for ourselves fully visible"(1968: 143). Given this essential condition



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of reciprocity, the Sartrean objectifying gaze cannot be received unambiguously when inserted into the context of Merleau-Ponty's reversible field of vision. The power of looking is met with the vulnerability of being looked at. It is on this basis that Fanon's collapse back into the devastation of the gaze can be resisted. Here, I want to do two things. First, I will detail exactly how this resistance is embedded in ontology; and second, I will go on to show how it can become *operative* in bodily practice through corporeal devices such as the female rebuff. I will therefore provide a way of avoiding ascribing a necessity to a Fanonian objectification without at the same time denying it as a possibility within the antiphonal continuum.

As I have shown throughout this thesis, Merleau-Ponty's work consistently affirms the centrality of embodied perception as a fundamental aspect of being-in-the-world and being-with-others. To be a human being is to exist as a human body occupying a shared perceptual field with other embodied beings. It is the *embodied* nature of perception which is the 'ground of a style of interacting with the environment' (Dillion 1988: 122). The body in effect stands between the agent and their environment or world. It also acts as the guarantor both of their difference and their commonality. Without a body, the subject could not be considered as a 'being-in-the-world', and without the world, we cannot understand the body as the body of an agent. For Merleau-Ponty, then, subject and world are reciprocally determined through the body. Again, this reciprocal determination is made possible through reversibility. For Merleau-Ponty:

[...] reversibility, is the idea that every perception is doubled with a

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counter-perception (Kant's real opposition), is an act with two faces, one no longer knows who speaks and who listens. Speaking-listening, seeing-being seen, perceiving-being perceived circularity (it is because of it that it seems to us that perception forms itself *in the things themselves*)

- *Activity = passivity*. (1968: 264-265)

In this unfinished work, Merleau-Ponty begins with the example of touch. He contends that if one hand is touching the other, the direction of 'touching-touched' can only be one-way at any particular moment. Either the left hand is touching or the right hand is touching. Whenever one tries to make both hands touch or both hands be touched, one discovers that there is always a falling back onto either the left hand or the right hand being active (touching), the opposite hand being passive (being touched). In other words, there is never a moment of simultaneity or of co-presence at work within the bodily experience.

This philosophical parable has extensive implications in Merleau-Ponty's thought and for the argument here. The sensing body, here in terms of a hand, only exists and makes sense in terms of existential resistance - in this example the other hand. The body therefore becomes a *relational* entity. As Merleau-Ponty writes, 'because my body touched and my touching, there is an overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things' (1968: 123). Therefore, the moment the hand begins to touch, it is always opening itself to the possibility that touching may *reverse* into *being touched*. This is so because they take place in the same body. Of course, the example of the two hands can be generalised (most obviously in the



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tactile or *haptic* register). As soon as I put my bare foot on the lawn, I am exposing myself to the possibility of sensing the gentle tuftiness of the grass as it cradles my feet.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that perception in general can be modelled on the interweaving of activity and passivity inalienably in operation in the tactile register. Most significantly, he argues that *reversibility* occurs in vision.<sup>7</sup> In 'Eye and Mind', Merleau-Ponty famously declares that the tree watches me as much as I watch the tree: 'In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who was looking at the forest. I felt, on certain days, that it was rather the trees that were looking at me' (1964: 167). Far from being an absurd statement, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that perception does not issue forth most fundamentally *solely* from the subject *to* the world. Rather, as with Monet's Olympia, a community of perceivers is always implicated in our intentional being-in-the-world. At the very moment in which I perceive (the tree, an other), I cannot attribute the origin of the field of perception to myself in that moment.<sup>8</sup> The other was there before I began

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<sup>7</sup>As has already been suggested, this reversibility thesis is at least implicit in his early texts, most notably the "Phenomenology of Perception". It is clear in that work that the embodied perceiving subject no longer merely *projects* meaning into the world. In that work, the subject is *embedded* into a world that exists and has meaning prior to it as much as the subject projects meaning upon the world. This already suggests that the world may have intentions upon the subject as much as the subject has intentions for the world. The point is that in this early work, Merleau-Ponty had already marked out conceptually, if not in language, the very reversibility that became explicitly stated in the later work.

<sup>8</sup> In Michel Tournier's novel *Friday* (1967), a re-writing of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, the structure of the narrative is grounded in an exploration of the necessity ascribed to the relationship between self and other for meaningful perception. Initially, Robinson imposed the key tenets of Roman Law (of property and authority) on the deserted island in order to control his perception (to comic effect). It is only after a series of disasters when these mechanisms become impossible that the 'other' island of Speranza presents itself as that which englobes his subjectivity and makes it possible. Robinson thereafter becomes the island, which perceives itself through him in specific spatio-temporal acts of perception. Without the mirror of the other, Robinson loses a sense of himself as a finite and bounded being, and his subjectivity becomes displaced by exteriority.

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looking at her, as was the tree. Therefore, I have the power to either reproduce or transform what is socio-culturally given (Burkitt 1999: 72). ‘My personal existence must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks my place in it’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962:254). In other words, when I see the tree, the tree opens up the possibility of another visual field which *transcends* my point of view. Merleau-Ponty is saying that the visual field cannot simply be *my* visual field alone - I do not own it nor can I master its origin. The moment I begin to see in a world that involves others, I am already prone to *being seen* – to blindspots and occlusions in my visual field which the other may fill. As Sobchack writes,

Although sight possesses the world in its activity of seeing, it does not own or circumscribe the world. The seen comes into the vision as potentially seeable by all, as occupying its own worldly space and concretely marking a distance between my incarnation and its own space.  
(1992: 85)

Therefore, perception is not purely an interiority or *immanence*, it is always already involved with exteriority or *transcendence* – again, not in oppositional or dialectical terms as Sartre would have it, but as interpersonal and as a reciprocal co-determination. In sum, perception takes place through the body communicating with a sensory field that transcends it. Merleau-Ponty shows that this must involve an inside/outside relation. As we shall see, this inside/outside intertwining ontology entails the presence of *motility* as a



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vital element of perception. Dance will be seen to be a form of perception and involve shifts between activity and passivity.

We can say that the tree is looking at me because it represents the possibility of transcendence or otherness at work in the perceptual field. As such, there is an *instability* assigned to how we must think the so-called "gaze". Any act of perception can only be given within the context of a field of vision that opens onto alterity. In the weakest sense, this alterity can be merely the *possibility* of another perspective - as in the case of Merleau-Ponty's tree. However, in a stronger sense, the alterity of the perceptual field could represent another perceiving being, such as another person. In this stronger sense, the opposing force of being looked at marks all looking. Because of this reversible structure, the other as Dillon notes, 'functions as my mirror: he de-centers me, lets me see myself from another vantage' (1988: 166). That is, the other allows me to experience the facticity of my own visibility, even though I will never know how the other perceives me. Having said this, how I experience or see myself can never be the same as the way in which the other perceives me. Dillon writes, 'A literal reversal of roles is impossible. Although looking presupposes being visible, seeing and being seen remain divergent, non-coincidental. I live my body ecstatically, but it is the only body I will ever live' (ibid: 174). Reversibility in this sense implies *asymmetry* not symmetry.

This corporeal inter-reflexivity can therefore be dissociated from the objectifying gaze of Fanon for whom the subject is reduced to a consciousness framed in terms of the other. In opposition to Fanon's adoption of Sartre's quasi-Hegelian account of a gaze that

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implies lordship or bondage through a totalisation of the power of vision, Merleau-Ponty's account demonstrates that power is essential *ambiguous*. Vision becomes an active possibility for falling back into passivity. My gaze upon you is resisted or contested (most readily, perhaps when the resistance is *not* just interpersonal) because of an inevitable inability to master my own visual field. This account of the ambiguous relation between power and the act of looking can therefore provide a general mode of power relations between people. As I love or deceive you, there is always the possibility of me being loved or deceived in turn. I cannot dominate either the world in front of me as it unfolds through each moment of motile perception, nor can I dominate the other absolutely. Even when black people could be brutally punished for looking at white people, bell hooks writes that,

Spaces of agency existed for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking" relations – one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (1992: 116)

Therefore, a Fanonian, optical mastery through objectification proves more difficult



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because I cannot master the other absolutely. Attempt at absolute mastery of the other opens me to the possibility of losing my power. Vision's reversibility therefore destabilises any account of power over another through the gaze. But how can this metaphysical framework configure itself as action? Here, we need to ground reversible vision in the nature of embodiment. The *undoing* of optical mastery becomes possible in light of Merleau-Ponty's earlier work *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). As we have encountered throughout this thesis, in this text, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the perceiving body is always already *motile*. To perceive in part involves construing meaning upon the world through the agency of the body. Motility is an agency of being, and as such, perception is endowed with a primordial movement. Beyond the merely physical, motility implies the possibility of transformation of self. The motile body is the ground of spontaneity, of a creative gesture that may inflect the framework of perception itself. As the work of the two previous chapters has shown, through rhythmic-gestural patterning, a context of generalised existential pain may be responded to in terms of the work of the body in creative practices such as dance. This *dance* implies that the subject cannot be fixed by the gaze. As well as the availability of creative response to the existential condition of pain, the potential to reproduce conditions of pain is also always at hand. Each motile perception bears the potential to transcend the operations of an external fixing force. As long as the subject moves spontaneously in the world, there is always already instituted the possibility of an active resistance to the fixing powers of the gaze. Merleau-Ponty's account of reversible embodied perception therefore shows that resistance to the gaze is always a *possibility*. Being seen or captured by the other's gaze can be responded to in terms of seeing – looking back or playfully returning the gaze, and

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again in terms of movement. We are already on the way to understanding the “female rebuff”.

### **Modes of Looking in Dancehall Queen**

These themes of the antiphony of the gaze, and the playful ambiguities between the activity of the looker and the apparent passivity of the looked-at are explicitly addressed in Don Letts and Rick Elgood’s film *Dancehall Queen* (1998). *Dancehall Queen* graced the Jamaican screens for a six months stretch, but did not receive a general release in Britain. The film centres on the trials and tribulation of Marcia, a single mother with two children and a brother to support. Self-employed as a street vendor opposite a popular nightclub, Marcia is determined to make sure that her daughters receive the education she was denied as a result of an early teenage pregnancy. Without a partner to ease the burden of raising two children, the villainous racketeer Larry, contradictorily referred to as Uncle Larry by her daughters financially supports her. In return for his financial contribution to Marcia’s household, there is an unstated agreement between Larry and Marcia that Larry can expect sexual favours from Marcia’s teenage daughter. Outraged by Uncle Larry’s advances, the girl tells her mother who although unhappy tells her that she needs ‘to get with the programme’ and promptly reminds her of Larry’s contribution to her education and the relative material comfort they both enjoy. The young girl grudgingly and painfully conceded to a sexual relation with Larry. From this moment Marcia painstakingly envisages an alternative means of supporting her family without much success until she sees the reigning dancehall queen at a patrol station.



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At this chance sighting of the nocturnal performer, Marcia is surprised by the simplicity of her look and her possession of a luxury car. She is intrigued by the activities in the nightclub and how the dancehall queen was able to acquire her wealth (in the display of car), look so plain during the day, and yet be so glamorously minimalist in her style of dressing at night. From her pitch outside the club, Marcia watches the scantily clothed streams of women as they enter the nightclub and decides that she, too, wants to become a dancehall queen. The rest of the film takes us through Marcia's effort to become the next Dancehall Queen, her manipulation of Larry to her own advantage, her reconciliation with her daughter and her emergence from a street vendor to a Dancehall Queen.

I now want to explore three interrelated factors, which situates *Dancehall Queen* outside the conventional theoretical framework of the oppositional or combative gaze in order to show how the film offers a way of rethinking vision in terms of what I have called the 'antiphonal continuum'. At this stage I will state them separately. They are:

1. The representation of the camera and the cameraman in the film are not posited outside the field of representation, rather, they occupy a significant place within the field of vision itself. Here the camera does not operate as a concealed background structure of the filmic work - analogous of the all-seeing, all-powerful eye/I - rather it functions as an embodied perspective within the film.
2. The audience in the film at the dancehall are not passive observers of the body staged

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at a distance for their consumption, rather the audience are active agents engaged in an antiphonal affirmation of the community through participation with the spectacle of one of their own erotically manifesting her body in motion. Many of the women in the audience have their eyes closed as though they are working within what I will call the 'play of inside out, and outside in'. To this extent, the power of vision is undermined and undercut by the closing of the eyes, the eyes only open as a show of collective communion and recognition.

3. The female rebuff. As well as a communal dialogue expressed through the antiphonies of the dancehall event, there is an individual moment at work in the film, whereby the gaze of the other is playfully "rebuffed" by the dancing body of the subject.

I will now examine each of these aspects of visual play at work in the film in turn.

### *The Camera*

I suggest that the role of the camera as represented in *Dancehall Queen* is central to the film's refusal to acquiesce to the white conventions of the powerful gaze. In effect, the cameraman's stance presents a different model of looking which, as I will argue shortly, is exemplified more generally in the film in terms of the audience-actor relation.

So, how does the camera as it is represented in the film lie outside of the conventions of the gaze? First of all, the camera is always being *carried* by the cameraman. This is an important point - because, as I am arguing, in the film the camera signifies the state of the gaze. Merleau-Ponty writes, "Our organs are no longer instruments; on the contrary, our instruments are detachable organs" (1964: 178). As the prosthetic of the human eye, the



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camera is therefore resolutely *embodied* (Celia Lury 1998). The camera does not stand alone. The camera is moved by a motile body, or indeed, if we take Merleau-Ponty's statement seriously, the camera *becomes* embodied. This cyborgian thesis has two implications in terms of the relation between the camera and movement.

First of all, if the body's intentions are expressed as *motility*, the camera itself becomes motile. We can say that the camera is inscribed within movement, within the dance of the motile body. The aperture of the lens is not therefore set within stasis, somehow at a remove from the vicissitudes and motions of the perceived world. The lens is, on the contrary, caught within the movement of the world, as another form of its unfolding materiality. In general, the presence of a camera within the film itself is, therefore, not simply an *object*, but a site of ambiguity between being body-subject and body-object. As body-subject, the camera is essentially motivated and motile, connected as it is to the embodied intentional matrix of the photographer. Sobchack makes a similar point when she writes in another context that the camera is 'primarily absorbed into the human and intentional experiencing of the world that is engaged and visible through it' (1992:177). To a large extent, the camera "sees" what the photographer wants the camera to see. Of course, accidents can always happen, even within the strictest of framings and the most precisely controlled depth-of-field settings. As Sobchack writes, 'There is a slight pressure existent between the flesh of the body lived introceptively and the exterior and opaque material of the camera that slightly resists the filmmaker's introceptive appropriation of the instrument' (ibid: 177).

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Second, as *body-object*, the camera takes up its own space within the material field of vision. The camera is, therefore, subject to movement imposed from outside. The view from the lens might be occluded by other bodies, or the photograph might get blurred from being knocked at the point of exposure. In the film, the camera is represented from the outside, *as visible*. Instead of opting for the usual cliché of a view from within the lens, this representation of the camera as object on a filmic level accords with the Merleau-Pontyan maxim ‘to see is to be seen.’ This mode of presenting a camera filming within the film, has parallels with the tradition of filming known as *cinéma vérité*. This tradition has developed a repertoire of stylistic devices that draw attention to the film as a process; through the camera showing film to be ‘an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflexive movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood’ (Sobchack 1992: 5-6). This reflexivity can never be completed however; the film-within-the-film can never merge fully onto the film itself. The film becomes divided from itself by a gap which mirrors the way in which the body-as-object and the body-as-subject cannot collapse into each other in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology. Merleau-Ponty writes that “[t]he enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen” (1968: 162). The camera occupying the double role of both frame and object produces a similar enigma. Represented as subject and as object, the representation of the camera suggests that *to film is to be filmed*. Filming<sup>9</sup> does not imply a purely active penetration of the visual field, rather it opens up an ambiguity of power at the core of vision. In psychoanalytic inspired feminist film theorists, film is

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Filming’ here is taken in a wider than usual sense to imply both the moving image and still photography.



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seen to have its own inherent meaning and with the capacity to capture the viewer. In contrast, Jackie Stacey's (1994) work on white female spectatorship in Hollywood cinema argues that the viewer participates in the production. Sobchack posits that film is only meaningful through the act of viewing and the viewer's engagement with it. Sobchack writes,

It is only in the act of viewing that the film is given to our experience as meaningful, and it is only in the act of viewing that the film possesses existence for itself as well as for us. A film can't be seen outside of our act of viewing it, a film can be outside of its own act of viewing. We must see a film for it be able to see it. Therefore, it is the act of viewing that links the spectator of a film and the film as spectator. (1992: 129)

In *Dancehall Queen* then, the camera is not a privileged site of scopic mastery, rather it becomes one more possible view within and upon the visual field. As such, the question of the *power* of filming cannot be given in advance – outside of the viewer. The camera, as the figure symbolising the eye of the gaze, does not assume a position at the top of a hierarchy of relations between vision and power. In *Dancehall Queen*, the camera occupies a horizontal relation with regard to all the other possibilities of vision at work in each scene. At times, the camera may therefore "capture" events in the filmic field before it; at other times however, the camera may itself be captured by events in that field itself. Therefore, the "exposure" of the open aperture is opened to being read as a double possibility. Not only is the visual field "exposed", rendered naked by the camera, but also

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the film (and by extension the photographer/cameraman) is “exposed”.<sup>10</sup> At this point a vulnerability opens up from the point of view of the photographer himself. A classic case of this latter event occurs in the film when the cameraman is in the front line of the audience at the dancehall. Jostled by the dancing bodies around him, his ability to photograph the dancehall women is disturbed by the fact of his embodied being lying in competition with other bodily beings. Far from being the site of a scopic mastery, the camera at this point embodies an oscillation between the capacity to capture the field of vision and expressing the fragility of embodied being in the world.

In sum, the representation of the camera in *Dancehall Queen* can be read as offering a strong challenge to the gaze’s hegemony in film theory. Situating the camera within the terms of Merleau-Ponty’s thesis about the ambiguity of the relation between vision and power, the eye and the prosthetic extension of the camera do not signify scopic mastery. By implication, that which is seen and that which is filmed do not signify scopic slavery. Filming (again in the wider sense) becomes ambiguous: there is no pre-determined fate to the empowerment of vision that results from it. That is, it is not decided in advance whether those ‘captured’ on film will be subjected to the rules and norms of its framing (for example, the norm of a white male heterosexual gaze) or whether the subjects filmed might in fact empower themselves by subverting or perverting those norms on their own terms.

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, this double reading of the film’s exposure demonstrates that the technical definition of exposure, referring to the time the film itself is exposed to the light, is already subject to reversal in terms of the non-technical conventions of the word.



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### *The Audience*

*Dancehall Queen* challenges the active/passive polarisation in the theory of the performer and the audience in a radical way. The audiences represented in the film are simply not passive recipients or consumers of an external and exteriorised spectacle. This representation of the black participating audience has been theorised by Annette Powell Williams (1972). While I recognise that there is a distinction between audience *in* the film, and the film's *audience*, in my reading of *Dancehall Queen*, I want to explore the role of the audience *in* the film. At the beginning of this thesis, I was interested in bringing together both this aspect of the audience relation by interviewing women involved in dancehall in Jamaica about their reception of the film. However, for several reasons I was unable to gain access to my intended participants.

The audiences in the film are *spectactors* not spectators (Boal 1992). That is, their role as spectators receiving the spectacle of the show does not dominate their role as active participants in the performance. Instead of there being the discrete entities of the performers, the performed and those witnessing, the event of the competition involves a fluid interpenetration of each element within the others. 'Show' is indeed an apt nomination, implying as it does a mimetic agency that will involve transfers across and disruptions of the constitutive elements of a performance treated as separate from each other. Those performing witness and respond to the mood of the crowd, and those in the crowd mimic the prowess of the performers. Consequently, that which is being performed (female agency and eroticism) is distributed equally by those on stage and those before it

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in a joyous transfer and cross-transfer of voluptuous capacity. The visual spectacle of a performing female body gyrating before the crowd is therefore not *merely* a spectacle; the distance or gap between performer and audience required for a pornotropic objectification closes down. The performer ceases to be regarded as a form of distance, an externalised object, a fetishised mode of activity that implies and enforces an equal and attendant mode of fascinated passivity. There is no 'action at a distance' or alienation between the stage activity and the audience. The audience is much more like a 'crowd' - a site for potential activity and engagement. The dancehall queen presents the audience as a representation of themselves; in other words the performing woman embodies her community.

In this sense, the embodied agency of the dancehall queen involves an 'erotics of community'. The community of the crowd is folded within her every movement. Her dancing body is the *subject* of the performance and the means by which the crowd can reciprocate by expressing its own identity. As an erotic site, the stage performance therefore allows for the jubilant celebration of female carnal power as a unique opportunity afforded by the culture. This celebration does not slip back into a pornotropics because the community itself is presented within the audience: the crowd contains celebrating women encouraging the vendor seller turned dancehall queen. Moreover, an erotics of community replaces pornography because both sides of the stage are engaged in an active dialogue or communion. This is in marked contrast to another scene in the film in the Go-Go dancing club. Here, women dance on stage for the consumption of the predominately white male observers. There is a distance between the



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dancers on stage and the (white) male observers whose gaze is inscribed within the conventional eye of power. The women perform for the men as sexual objects and fetishised black skin, and the men's participation in this performance is limited to self-absorbed visual erotic pleasure.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, the dancehall queen performs the function of a goddess. As Athena housed in the temple of the Parthenon presented an ideal for the Athenian people, Marcia and her competitors are the motile statues of an idealised eroticism that becomes the locus for an expression of community. Although in a sense functioning as an ideal and therefore a transcendent being, the *dancehall queen* is nonetheless *not* an exteriority or an avatar of alienation; rather she exemplifies an ideal grounded in the rhythmic body. As such, she represents a *corporeal ideal*; a transcendence enveloped within an incarnate community. This intertwining of the ideal and the somatic is implicated within her very title - the 'dance-hall-queen' suggesting all at once a movement, a place and a figure of transcendence.

It is particularly the way in which the female members of the crowd perform that disrupts the white western conventions of the gaze. As was alluded to above, the women celebrate a play of 'inside out and outside in.' During the performance, the film represents women in the audience dancing along to the music and the performance with their eyes closed.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Even within this conventional pornographic display of black women's body for white male consumption, given the terms of Merleau-Ponty's embodied agency of vision it is certainly open to challenge whether these women are objects of the male gaze.

<sup>12</sup> Although it might appear to be the case that the audience of watching *Dancehall Queen* might on the contrary have to keep their eyes open in order to see and understand the meaning of the closed eyes of the

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This denial of an overarching visual logic is the opening towards a corporeal communion with the woman on stage, and by implication, with all women of the community. By closing their eyes, the women turn inwards to their own bodily possibilities as the site of celebration of self. Rather than this inward turn presenting itself as a moment of separation or alienation, the invisibility and darkness of dancing with closed eyes becomes the expression of a heightened sense of inter-relationality. By not privileging only the visual and affirming the movement of dance, the women make a connection which is more immediate and primordial than anything vision can afford. This connection is made possible by the joint celebration of movement and the voluptuous possibilities of black womanhood. The inside-quality of dancing with closed eyes is therefore the means by which the outside spectacle of the dancing queen is returned to and grounded in the body, against the possibility of an alienating visual logic. And in response to the rapturous women in the crowd, the dancer on stage in turn infuses ever more joy and passion into her movement.

In sum, in *Dancehall Queen*, the audience - performer relation is therefore represented as resolutely antiphonal. The play of call and response is the dialogue of a community celebrating itself erotically. The possibility of the event being framed within an alienating logic of vision is defeated by closed eyes and by movement. Through this representation, a different model of vision is offered: instead of an exteriorising power

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filmic spectator. As we shall see in a moment, this objection operates on the basis of an assumption that film is individual and primarily a visual medium. Film does not only engage the visual senses, it is also an acoustic medium. The meaning and the effect of a film is constituted through the relationship between sound and vision. It is only within a Western ocular-logic can film be reduced purely to vision; it is only on this premise that audience vocalisation seen as 'noise' in the cinema can be viewed as a distraction to the enjoyment of the film.



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over, vision is inscribed within the antiphonies of communal dialogue. Instead of a community being shattered and torn apart by spectacularisation and an alienating commodity fetishism (the thesis of a Marxist critique of Western culture), the film empowers the possibility of community such that vision as a power is reduced to operating within *its* terms.

There are two points that I would like to make as extensions of this summary. Firstly, the question arises as to whether *Dancehall Queen* and my reading of it can be accused of romanticising or idealising a culture that is tangential to mainstream western culture. My response to this accusation is to turn it on its head. It is only on the basis of a blindspot of difference that such an attack can be made. That is, only when the conventions of a white (middle-class) audience are granted as normal can any other configuration appear as an idealisation or romanticisation. And therefore only on such a basis can the power of the 'gaze' be assumed to hold such power and appear to be such a critical tool in the production of film-theory discourse. What *Dancehall Queen* demonstrates in critical terms is that the normativity of a physically passive, homogeneously responsive audience that consumes the spectacle of a performance quietly and without gesture is in fact a *culturally* and *historically specific* phenomenon. A possible response to the argument here is that white western audiences are not passive. Rather, they express their active engagement with the film *differently*; not through the body but through reflective critical attention. To this I would respond that the difference an embodied responsive audience makes is that the response is not individualistic and internally confined. By not being confined to the head-space of a mentalistic model of reception, the vocal and gestural

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response is 'out there', as an engagement not only with the film itself but also with the community that is in the process of responding critically. There are then at least two dialogues at work in black audiences response: (to films, to music or other forms of expression) that between the performed and the crowd, and also that of the crowd with itself.

From the above account, it is therefore only on local terms (local to hegemonic forms in the west) that the alienating logic of vision operates. The reference here to hegemony indicates that even in the west, other forms of audience and other rhythms of vision are available. It is interesting in this regard to look to moments in black literature when this point about audience difference is made. For instance, in his autobiography, Malcolm X writes,

I think I could be speaking blindfolded and after five minutes, I could tell you if sitting out there before me was an all-black or an all-white audience. Black audiences and white audiences feel distinguishably different. Black audiences feel warmer, there is almost a musical rhythm, for me, even in their silent response. (1965: 390)

What an interesting passage! Again, it bears witness to the denial of acquiescing to a visual logic of domination. It is through closed eyes that Malcolm X could best discern the character of his audience. And this difference is marked in terms of heat and rhythm, again paradoxically through silence. His words can be found to echo in any of our



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metropolises today, if one ventures to the cinema and watches a film in the company mostly of black people. Black cinema audiences are often quite rowdily responsive where a constant dialogue between the audience and the filmic events is expressed verbally and often at some volume. From a white perspective, this can seem at first sight as though the audience is not watching or listening. Again, it would be the violence of a white normativity that imposes the reading of the film not being 'watched properly' on such occasions. Such a reading is not receptive to the possibility that a different, more antiphonal, structure of reception and perception are at work.

The model of the black audience, literally in dialogue with the spectacle before it, answering in terms of mouth and ear to what is presented in sound and light, is the model of an actively participative and embodied audience that responds to what is presented not solely as individuals and in terms of cognition, but also in terms of community and sociality. As I have pointed out, this second form of response in effect involves the community in dialogue *with itself*. This is the model proposed by *Dancehall Queen*.

### ***The Female Rebuff***

Let us return to the dancing bodies of the Go-Go bar scene in the film. Here, the women slither and inflect their bodies around poles, displaying their buttocks behind revealing underwear, pummeling the floor and gyrating their pelvises in a steamy series of sex-act simulations. To all intents and purposes, they are caught within the terms of the other's power: they are dancing solely for the male other, in ways which will feed into the other's

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fantasies about black female sexuality. The Go-Go girls are then apparently destined to be victims of the other's gaze. They can in no way dance for themselves, or within their own terms.

And yet, even in the most extreme instance in the film of the gaze used oppressively, there is room for re-description. For example, what if some of the women actively involve themselves with the erotics of performance? Would this mean that they are merely affirming that which oppresses them and degrades them into being sex objects? Or, is it not possible to heed to the possibility of *agency* at work in a Go-Go dancer who dances with enjoyment and carnal pleasure?

Without doubt, I am not suggesting that we should go so far as to accept without challenging the pornotropic practices. However, the issue of the subject's affirmation of a specific bodily practice does raise the question of whether the context of oppression in operation can be regarded as absolute or total. This is because the moment affirmation of a bodily performance becomes an issue, the charge of absolute passivity in the face of the other's gaze gets eroded. However *complicit* the Go-Go dancer may be in the pornotroping at work in the scene, her involvement and activity as affirming the erotic dance entails that a form of agency is at work.

This relation between the performance of dance and the agency implied when that performance is affirmed by the performer is the basis of what I am calling the "female rebuff". It is precisely because dancing involves the possibility of agency that playful



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resistance to an oppressive gaze is made available. Sartrean oppositional combat is undermined by an engaging re-framing of the situation in the direction of playful antiphony. Each time a woman dances for a man, the woman can always actively affirm the performance, and gain autonomy and a level of agency which may re-contextualise the situation. Admittedly, in the Go-Go bar scene, the levels of autonomy and agency available can hardly subvert the economic and symbolic frames at work. However, outside of this extreme example, the power of agency at work in the display of the female body in *Dancehall Queen* shows again that the power of vision is ambiguous.

An example of this occurs when the photographer approaches Marcia in the club, bewigged and in her dancehall finery, and asks her if he can take some pictures. Marcia agrees and then begins to pose and twist her body suggestively to the camera. Here, I would argue that Marcia therefore begins to perform for the camera, rather than being captured within the terms of the image's potential audience. Marcia controls the display of her mature eroticity, and teases the cameraman and audience in the process. Between the camera and the displayed motile body, an erotic dialogue takes place, the ground of power of which remains ambiguous. Indeed, it is an effect of performance that the question of power itself is undermined and recast in terms of erotic play. In the Caribbean context, women dancing erotically often remain completely in charge of the operations of the male gaze at work in the dance-event. The women can tease with their bodies and their eyes, and make sexual suggestions with their hips and with the way in which they return the gaze of the other – male and female. In this way, they can lead the gaze onwards, or they can reject any unwanted advances. Far from being a context of

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visual oppression, or an oppositional power dynamics as Sartre might suggest, the voluptuous motioning body of the woman becomes empowered as an agent with the power of choice over who she dances with and who she goes home with.

As on the collective level of the dancehall event, whereby the performer on the stage becomes one node in a reciprocal and fluid affirmation of the erotic power of the community (within which the camera is positioned), the female rebuff shows that oppressive pornotroping is not the inevitable outcome of erotic display. Moreover, the female rebuff begins to demonstrate evidence to the contrary. The more a woman gains command of her body and the erotic eye-play between herself and the external other, the more autonomy and freedom of choice she will gain in the play that ensures. In other words, the more voluptuous and controlled the display, the more she can develop the possibilities of free agency. And again, this possibility would itself reveal an erotic power at work generally in the community. In the case of the dancehall queen, rebuffing moments of the audiences' gaze would be celebrated by all in the audience as another level of erotic bodily competence and carnal joy, a competence and joy made available by the culture and the community itself, as reflections of the values it places upon the erotic, dance and movement, outside of the repressive confines of power-play and capture.

By exploring Merleau-Ponty's idea that perception always involves reversibility and motility, the notion that perception involves an alienating or asymmetric gap between the perceiver and the perceived is relativised. It is this key phenomenological insight that undermines the oppositional power ascribed to the gaze both in Fanonian and Sartrean



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ontology and in film theory discourse. Merleau-Ponty's inside-outside view of perception entails that there can never be a "pure spectator" or a pure and spectacular object. Visual perception in fact must operate somewhere between these extremes, according to an antiphonal continuum of sorts.

By analysing the film *Dancehall Queen* in terms of the representation of the camera, the audience and the performative potentiality of the individual dancing body, the relativity and variations between activity and passivity at work between the gaze and performance were displayed, again along an antiphonal continuum. At the one extreme, the Go-Go bar scene approximates to the classic conventional context of an oppressive male gaze consuming the objectified sexual contents on display. As I argued, even in this situation, it is arguable whether the oppression is inevitably and necessarily absolute. On the other extreme, the euphoric triumph of Marcia's victory over the reigning dancehall Queen represents the highest potentiality for a woman's erotic self-display; becoming a dancehall queen involves a celebration of self and a celebration of community values placed upon the erotic powers of women by both sexes.

Most importantly for the purposes of the argument of this thesis, in showing that there is a continuum between the relatively passive and the relatively active possibilities of the motile dancing body, *Dancehall Queen* challenges the conventions of the power of the gaze at work unquestioned in many theoretical texts. Far from being inevitably pornotropic, dancing, as an affirmation of the autonomous power of the female body, can in fact lead to women being in touch with themselves, and with the time of tradition and

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the possibility of a more empowered future.



## Conclusion

The main concern of my argument in this project has been to re-situate black diasporicity as a form of lived experience. Instead of a self-referential theoretical celebration of the value of terms such as 'hybridity' and 'interstitiality', I have sought to return diasporicity to its ground - in the relations between the body and its places and displacements. In this respect, the thesis has relied in a sustained way upon the methodological rigour of existential phenomenological analysis - whether of the sea, the ship, the relation between pain and agency, looking relations or the space of the Dancehall. In general terms, I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers rich resources for rethinking questions of black diasporic identity, agency and creative experience. In this respect, a key guiding concern has been to show how *subjects* are always also *agents*. However, I have gone beyond the remit of Merleau-Ponty's work to the extent that my argument is resolutely grounded within the concrete situation of black diasporic agents. Using the work of Fanon, I have shown the limitations of offering a metaphysical account of embodiment that does not pay adequate attention to how embodiment is shaped through different social forces - gender, race, class, generation, geography, education, sexuality, the forces of physical limitation and so on. Although Merleau-Ponty offers an account of consciousness, thought and knowledge that is embodied through the flesh, its deficit lies in the fact that he does not return embodiment to the concrete complexity of autonomous potentiality in the field of normative and social limitation.

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Thus, working with, through and beyond Merleau-Ponty, I have argued that there is a pattern of existence and a rhythm of being which I termed rhythmic-gestural patterning. Rhythmic-gestural patterning is a way of disturbing the notion that identity is a 'logic', showing in its place that identity is more a form of *inflection*. In this way, I have uncovered a sense of primordial movement vibrating through the centre of black diasporicity that is nonetheless not essentialist. Rhythmic-gestural patterning reveals everyday being-in-the-world for black diasporic agents involves a chorus, a polyvocality, and a polyphony. Through the emphasis placed on these antiphonal forms of being, I have demonstrated that at the core of black existence there is a plurality similar to and yet beyond DuBoisian 'double-consciousness'. Plurality in identity, the 'changing same', is ensured as African formal structures of expression (the 'cut', songs of derision, antiphony and so on) were transported into the New World and modified through encounters with the different found cultures. This approach entails that black diasporic identity and cultural expressions *cannot* be viewed solely in terms of a relation to an anterior African culture, nor can they be the product of a unified history of pain and violence wrought by the abstract logic of white heteropatriachal capitalism. Instead, black identity is presented as a phonic round-dance of continuity and discontinuity, resistance and complicity, pain and pleasure, freedom and collective affirmation, in the face of the ongoing threat of existential dread and social injustice.

In other words, I have shown that the dance of existence begins from the centre where there is the dance. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the motile body can be re-interpreted as privileging *dance* as a fundamental mode of being-in-the-world. In the beginning,



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through each here and now moment of a situation and a mood, dancing agents respond by inflecting, reshaping and re-patterning what they see and hear, so that dancing becomes a way of returning to a beginning that has already *moved on*, as the dancers themselves have moved on. Theorising black identity in terms of rhythm is a way of saying that identity has no centre and no essentialist core; there are just forms and pulses that get reinscribed and reworked as they return to themselves. Again, as we have seen, through the notion of polymetric rhythm, the relationship between a dancer and a drummer is without a centre. The drummer doesn't own the rhythm, neither does the dancer, rather, there is forever an absent centre or a kind of movement of rhythms between dancer and drummer. This relation between dancer and drummer of an absent rhythmic centre reminds us of how alterity is essentially inscribed within the warp and woof of black diasporic being. So again ambiguity is inserted into our ways of being and relating with others.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has been useful for my purpose in this thesis because his account of agency is essentially holistic. While all kinds of constraints are imposed upon us through social, cultural, economic and political factors, and the conditions of our birth, we are nonetheless capable of using our powers of self-projection to create, to question and to initiate change and disruption in the socio-political realm. As it should be clear by now, existential phenomenology does not propose that there is one field of action, affecting and imprinting its own will onto others, rather, in its terms, one field of action relays into another field of action which is responded to and the response will be felt yet again. This perspective has allowed me to show that within any historical period

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the pattern of cause and effect and agency are much more complex and non-linear. The 'origin' of a culture is not that point in chronological time when it began; it is rather *re-born* through each of its re-articulations. Expression is the here and now engine of cultural originality thought of as differential repetition.

This analysis connects closely with Elaine Scarry's project of the redemptive power of the imagination in the context of extreme pain. As I have argued, it is precisely because the subject is aware (in a pre-conscious way) of its own bodily capacity that it actively strives to move beyond situations of limitation and violence. Such a theory of pre-conscious agency provides a model of autonomy has enabled me to hold in proper balance the existential condition of black pain and the capacity for creativity, joy and pleasure. Black diasporic experience may have been shaped by an ongoing history of affliction and woundedness, however, black people do not necessarily continually refer to the person or system that *caused* the pain. Pain, woundedness and affliction become a *resource* for imaginative re-working, so that the fixity of being the victim of an external situation is eschewed.

In a similar way, we may concur with Dennis Patrick Slattery's work on the relationship between naming and woundedness. A wound (whether physical or otherwise) can be seen as a form of naming which negates the existence of the person named; on the other hand, the wound can be turned into poetry, music. Just as the knives and bullets rife within Jamaican ghettos are turned into a pattern of clothing in the form of slash marks or bullet track holes in certain Dancehall fashions, or just as limbo dancing palpably



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demonstrates the spatial dimensions onboard the Middle Passage, so too pain does not have to engulf and reduce the subject into a quivering powerless inert being. I have shown that through various expressive means, black diasporic agents try incessantly to turn around oppression so that they are no longer positioned as powerless victims incapable of acting differently to that which is expected of them. For example, in Dancehall culture, the experience of social inequalities, patriarchal violence and white norms of beauty become a resource for Dancehall women to assert the agency of their bodily being. When we look at the celebration of women's erotics in Dancehall, it is almost as though existential pain is bracketed out and what remains is the pain itself as a form of energy and a dynamic of celebration. Again, when we look at other black diasporic expressions such as the blues, we see this bracketing of pain. The blues is essentially an expressive form that is about the transmutation of pain into expression. The blues comes from the spiritual, from the cotton field, from real physical pain and hard labour, and yet it becomes music, a tradition, poetry, an expression that can re-energise the collective so that they can reconnect to their own active capacity and agency. What is it at work is exactly the forms of externalising imagination and modes of autonomy Scarry discusses. It is the imagination that allows agents to bring into being a world that is not reducible to just being dominated. The idea of just being dominated is something that most human beings cannot easily cope with - therefore they refuse it. In this respect, black diasporic agents are no different from anyone else. Instead, the difference lies in the history, and the sea of memory that swells up every waking day.

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At this point, re-thinking the notion of survival becomes significant. I have tried to suggest that through the creative work of the imagination, black diasporic agents reject domination and power *over* by yearning to survive in a different form. Using Scarry, I argued that survival is more about the imagination (even in extreme instances) - and not just about brute physical need. In the same way that the organs of our physical body are in fact expressive of a pre-ordained world of habits, diet and general style of being-in-the-world, so too our imagination reflects our world-historical situation. When our very existence and way of being is threatened, what takes over is not just a physical impulse to survive but an imaginative response to survive and adapt. Whether it is the context of slavery or from Scarry's tortured victim, from a certain perspective, the subject is totally dominated, there is no escape and therefore no way of responding. However, through Scarry, we see that the one realm that is left for transcendence from pain is the realm of the imagination. In diasporic black cultures, the history of pain has generated several responses. One response has been to succumb to domination and fear where its practice and logic gets reinscribed in modes of relating. Another has been to allow the pain to engulf one's being, to the point where the subject becomes numb by pain and therefore incapable of acting and challenging hegemonic practices in a way that calls for accountability and re-distribution. Both positions are certainly present in diasporic black cultures. However, in this thesis, I have deliberately focused on the use of oppression as a resource for creativity, for music and poetry in motion in the context of an ongoing dialogue with the host cultures and community (themselves diasporic by turns). Again, the key issue has been to highlight *agency* rather than *subjectivity* - black diasporic agents



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may have been (and still are) on the receiving end of global white supremacy, however, this does not mean that they are continually and totally its *victims*.

Finally, the account I have offered here is redemptive in scope. My example of Dancehall culture shows that even in situations of oppression, autonomous, liberating expression can be at work. Like oppression, redemption is never *absolute*. Redemption is wrought with ambiguity. Redemptive possibilities are always just that; momentary, taking place in little glimpses that can easily be missed. I am therefore not romanticising dancehall, rather, I am showing that although it can be read as a patriarchal space, the line of power is not absolute. There are little victories and moments of agency where the agent returns to her own corporeal schemas. The embodied capacity to act, to change the world, to refuse to be completely overpowered by the logic of domination means that the body-subject can be the beginning of a new kind of politics which demand accountability and reconstitution of power relations and normative ideology. In broader terms, just as Richard Sennett noted that those Athenian women, hidden from history, worshipping the lover god, were not engaged in an explicitly political project, so too, for women in Dancehall culture, the corporeal rhythmic moment of redemption is more like a "cultural politics" in bell hooks' sense. Rather than representational politics, the project encountered here is more like a politics of autonomy garnered in a context that will never allow it to become absolute. And so freedoms are attained and powers increased amidst limitation, and joy rises like a dancing cloud above an ocean of pain.

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